The 4th EARLI SIG 14 Learning and Professional Development Conference

27-29 August, 2008

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Career progression, career decision-making and professional learning

Professor Jenny Bimrose (corresponding author)
Professorial Fellow
Email: jenny.bimrose@warwick.ac.uk
Tel: + 44 (0) 24 7652 4231
Fax: + 44 (0) 24 7652 4241
Institute for Employment Research
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
United Kingdom

Professor Alan Brown
Professorial Fellow
Email: alan.brown@warwick.ac.uk
Tel: + 44 (0) 24 7652 3512
Fax: + 44 (0) 24 7652 4241
Institute for Employment Research
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
United Kingdom

Dr. Sally-Anne Barnes
Senior Research Fellow
Email: sally-anne.barnes@warwick.ac.uk
Tel: + 44 (0) 24 7657 4397
Fax: + 44 (0) 24 7652 4241
Institute for Employment Research
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
United Kingdom

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Abstract

Careers guidance increases the likelihood that adults will engage in learning, gain qualifications (or improve existing ones) and progress into work or within work. An analysis of adult career progression from a longitudinal, qualitative case study in England, highlights how individuals have distinctly different approaches to engaging in professional learning and changing work-related roles. Data from this study suggests that the ways in which individuals navigate their career pathways are linked to four career decision-making styles. Recurrent patterns of behaviour, tracked over a five year period in the case study reveal four emergent styles, which can be represented as: evaluative, strategic, aspirational or opportunistic. This article examines the ways in which these different decision-making styles mediate different behavioural responses to career progression, including engagement with professional learning.

Key words: guidance, career decision-making, career narrative, professional learning, identity

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the strategic importance of careers guidance, or 'Information, Advice and Guidance' (IAG), to the skills agenda in England has been acknowledged in a manner unprecedented during its relatively short history. Successive government reports over the past three decades have positioned it as crucial in the general drive to increase the country's economic competitiveness (see, for example, Department of Employment & Department of Education & Science, 1986; Employment Department, 1995; HM Government & Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills [DIUS], 2007; Skills Commission, 2008). A recent high profile report, commissioned by the government, stresses the need for the UK to 'raise its game' by increasing the skill levels of its labour force, if it is to increase its economic competitiveness (HM Treasury, 2006, p.1). This same report also identifies the importance of embedding a culture of learning and proposes that 'a new and sustained national campaign to raise career aspirations and awareness' will contribute to the achievement of the skills agenda (p.103), together with support to make informed choices (p.107). Specifically, the report recommends the establishment of: 'a new universal adult careers service, providing labour market focused careers advice for all adults' (HM Treasury, 2006, p.23). This recommendation is now being taken forward with the implementation plan for this development (HM Government & DIUS, 2007) stating how the new adult careers service will 'give every adult easy access to skills and careers advice that will help them find work and progress in their careers' (p.7) and that this new service will 'ensure that everyone is able to access the help they need to take stock of where they are in achieving their goals and ambitions, and to get the support they need to advance themselves and achieve their full potential' (p.10).

These policy developments in England, which focus on increasing the skill levels of the labour force, highlight the increased profile accorded to careers guidance in supporting adults develop their careers by enhancing their career learning. This article examines the four different styles of decision making used by adult clients who had received careers guidance and then whose career progression has been tracked over a five year period, in a qualitative case study in England (2003-2008).

2. Researching careers guidance for professional learning

A longitudinal, qualitative research methodology for evaluating the effectiveness of careers guidance was developed, and implemented, in England (Bimrose, Barnes, Hughes & Orton,

2004). Objectives of this research were to: compare the nature of careers guidance interventions in different professional contexts; examine what, exactly, proved to be useful to clients; explore the key features of careers guidance interviews; compare the perspectives of clients, practitioners and expert witnesses on careers guidance interviews and their effectiveness to clients; increase understanding of how to align processes of effective careers guidance practice with policy requirements in England; and examine practice (that is, beliefs, concepts, ideas, theories and actions) in the search for new understandings of effectiveness (p.5).

This research study was designed to build on the recommendation that in evaluating the effectiveness of careers guidance, insights already gained from quantitative data, should be complemented with those that can only be gained from qualitative research – in particular, longitudinal studies (Hughes, Bosley, Bowes & Bysshe, 2002). Accordingly, the study comprised a five year (2003-2008) case study approach, which used qualitative methodologies that problematised practice and raised issues relevant to theory development. Its primary focus was the 'user voice' – the perspective of the clients and/or customers who are the primary consumer of careers guidance services. A qualitative approach was used since it encouraged multiple methods of investigation, encouraged an overtly involved stance and recognised the importance of context and social structure. Within this framework, grounded theory method represented a suitable research paradigm because it provided a way of producing theory from data relevant to prospective uses. The method stressed the importance of phasing data collection so that findings and insights from one stage could inform subsequent stages (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2007). General exploratory questions were formulated and the literature review delayed. Coding of data occurred simultaneously with its collection, allowing the focus to change and leads to be pursued. This approach also enabled detailed comparisons to be made across varied careers guidance contexts.

Fifty in-depth case studies were undertaken in the first year of investigation (2003-2004), which compared: the client's perceptions of a careers guidance episode; the practitioner's perceptions of the same careers guidance episode; and the perceptions of an 'expert witness' (expert witnesses were required to have significant experience of delivering and/or assessing careers guidance). Data sources for each case study comprised: organisational sources (e.g. reports, mission statements, researcher observations, managers, practitioners, publicity

leaflets, etc.); digital recordings of the careers guidance interviews together with typed transcriptions; questionnaires collecting brief background data on the client, the practitioner and the careers guidance context were also collected from the client, the practitioner and an organisational representative, respectively; and finally, questionnaires completed by individual clients, careers guidance practitioners and 'expert witnesses' about the careers guidance interviews (Please note that expert witnesses did not observe the interviews 'live'. Rather, they listened to the digital recording of the interview and had access to a typed transcript).

A team of eight researchers undertook the initial phase of data collection. All were experienced in research and six were experienced both in research and in careers guidance. Five, who were all experienced and/or qualified in careers guidance and assessment of careers guidance, acted as 'expert witnesses'. Moderation of these expert witnesses was undertaken, on a random basis, by two senior researchers in the team. An evaluator external to the research team acted as a moderator for the overall research process. In subsequent years of data collection for the four follow-up studies, five of the original eight researchers ensured a degree of consistency in the approach taken to data collection.

For the follow-up studies, conducted over the subsequent four years, the 50 clients who participated in the initial phase of this study were contacted by telephone annually for four consecutive years (2004-2008) starting approximately one year after the case study interview. Each of the telephone interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Overall, there has been an extremely low attrition rate over the five year period of data collection; 45 of the 50 clients were successfully contacted for the first follow-up; 36 for the second; 30 the third; and 29 for the final follow-up (which includes a client lost in the previous follow-ups, but successfully contacted in the final year). Methods used to contact the clients, the response rates and the characteristics of those clients successfully contacted have been detailed elsewhere (Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes, 2005). The follow-up interviews have tracked clients' progress and career trajectories, their perception of the careers guidance received and its role in their career development. In particular, follow-ups have investigated the barriers and influences and the client views of their career choices and decisions (Bimrose *et al.*, 2005; Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes, 2006; Bimrose & Barnes, 2007a).

Both deductive and inductive analysis of the case study data has been undertaken. A framework adapted from previous research into careers guidance interviews was used for the deductive analysis of each careers guidance episode. This was extended and developed using inductive analysis of digital recordings of interviews and open coding to capture emergent themes. Analysis of the questionnaire responses and interviews (including the follow-up interviews) were undertaken using a qualitative data analysis software package. Data were coded independently and compared by 'expert witnesses' and field researchers. By using this approach a typology of effective careers guidance has emerged, together with evidence of perceptions and outcomes of useful careers guidance. Additionally, a typology of career decision-making styles has emerged, which will be discussed next.

3. Career decision making styles

Career-decision making has been the focus of various research studies. For example, the cultural dimensions of career decision-making difficulties (Wei-Cheng, 2004); career maturity in career decidedness and career decision-making (Creed & Patton, 2003); the role of values in the career decision-making process (Colozzi, 2003); and levels of confidence as predictors of career decision-making ability (Paulsen & Betz, 2004). Without a clear understanding of the different ways in which adults approach the career decision making process, there is a danger that those supporting their progression into professional learning will give inappropriate guidance. One influential study of career decision making, carried out by Harren (1979) with college students, identified three styles of decision making: 'rational', where individual's adopted a logical and systematic approach to decisions; 'intuitive', where there was more reliance on internal affective states in decision making processes; and 'dependent', where decisions are contingent upon the reactions of friends, family, and peers. The first two styles (rational and intuitive) involve individuals taking personal responsibility for decision making, whereas the third (dependent) involves projection of responsibility onto significant others (e.g. parents, partner, etc.). However, the sample from which this typology was derived was restricted to college students and was conducted over three decades ago. The longitudinal study referred to above has provided the opportunity to collect and analyse data from a sample of adults of different ages, gender, ethnic origin and academic levels making transitions in different circumstances, both into and out of education, employment and training over a five year period.

A four-fold typology of career decision making has emerged from the analysis of data collected from participants in the longitudinal study (2003-2008). The four career decision-making styles are: evaluative; strategic; aspirational; and opportunistic. The stability of these styles has now been examined over a four year period. In only one case was the style initially amended as a result of scrutiny of data from subsequent phases of the investigative (from a strategic style to evaluative). Additionally, two clients who were experiencing barriers to progression in the second phase of the study are now espousing distinct career decision making strategies as a result of changed circumstances (both demonstrating opportunistic styles). Given the nature of the qualitative data from which these styles were derived, they remain tentative and require further validation – though two emerging from this research (that is, strategic and opportunistic) correspond closely to two of the three styles developed by Harren (1979).

Whilst the fourfold typology that has emerged from this study so far is tentative, it provides powerful insights into the different approaches adopted by clients in their attempts to navigate their way around the labour market. It is also useful to reflect on some implications for the practice of careers guidance for adults (Bimrose & Barnes, 2007b). The typology is discussed below.

3.1 Evaluative careerists

Evaluative career decision making is best reflected in the psychological literature on social and emotional intelligence in which individuals possess a range of social and emotional competences. This approach exemplifies the notion that self-appraisal through the identification and evaluation of individual needs, values and abilities is central to career planning (Ball, 1996). Individuals using this form of decision making are undertaking a process of learning not only about themselves, but also about the consequences of their long term decisions. Through a process of self-reflection and evaluation, individuals become: more comfortable and confident in their decisions (Gati & Saka, 2001); aware of their particular skills (Boyatzis, Goleman & Rhee, 2000; Gati & Saka, 2001); and are able to identify preferred outcomes and goals (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000). The career narratives of six of the research participants in the final phase of the longitudinal study demonstrate strong elements of this particular approach to career decision making. They had engaged with a process of critical self-reflection and self-evaluation that comprised periods (sometimes prolonged) of review and reflection. This could be construed as prevarication or indecision.

Ultimately, however, the process resulted in decisions that potentially contributed to a longer term career goal. However, a degree of uncertainty and ambiguity was evident throughout because there was always the probability that the process of reflection might indicate a different future.

One example of this style of career decision-making relates to a client who was taking the first steps in thinking about returning to work following a personal upheaval. She is a single parent in receipt of benefits. In her one-to-one career guidance session in the first year of this study, it became clear that she wanted to take up learning opportunities, but was constrained both by the timing of courses (which had to fit with school hours) and difficult financial constraints which had occurred as a result of a marriage break-down. The career guidance interview explored her circumstances and future employment aspiration to enrol on a vocational training course. After the interview, she had been unable to achieve her primary career goal of vocational training because of its lack of availability locally, together with child-care responsibilities and financial difficulties arising from her marriage break-down. As an alternative, she opted to enrol on an adult education course. Although this had not been her first choice, through a process of evaluation and self-reflection she was able to recognise that this had not only had a positive impact on her self-confidence, but had also helped her to understand that she 'loved learning'. After successful completion of the adult education course and as a direct result of this realisation, she had, therefore, applied for a course at her local higher education course because this fitted in with her childcare responsibilities:
'I mean I only applied for the one, because I thought there's no way I'm going to be travelling anywhere. You know, I've got (name of daughter) to think about and all the rest of it. So I'm going for my local one, which is (name of university) and obviously I've had all the letters back saying, Yes, fine, let us know for sure by May'. However in the final year of follow-up, this client had been unable to take-up the offer of higher education because of the financial constraints arising because of her situation. She has not, however, given up. Even though her immediate future is somewhat uncertain, she is planning to pursue the professional learning that would enable her to realise her career aim of teaching at some stage in the future and in the meantime is considering evening courses that are free.

A second example is provided by a graduate who had been employed for three years in administration with a small finance company and had become very disillusioned with his job. A process of reflection brought him to the decision that he wanted to change his career, but

that there were practical issues to overcome. He had a mortgage on his house, so had financial commitments to meet. He wanted to remain in the same geographical area and he did not drive, so was dependent on public transport. After completing a psychometric test, he started to explore his options and invested much holiday entitlement in a thorough process of job search (including visiting possible employers). This eventually became a frustrating process as he was unable to spend the time needed in researching and applying for alternative jobs. Weighing all his constraints and options carefully, he then decided that he wanted to train for teaching. After researching this possibility thoroughly, he decided it was financially and practically feasible. He therefore applied for teacher training and was accepted on a training course. However, a few months into the training course, he decided that teaching was not the right choice and left: 'I had the half term in the spring and...I kind of realised that…everybody I knew was doing office work…it's just a sort of demanding job…when I was off, everybody else was working…I just thought, you know, 'Do I really want to do this for the rest of my life?'…also I was having to get into debt to do the teaching anyway, so I thought, well if I quit now then I can avoid getting into another couple of thousand pounds worth of debt'.

He returned to working in the finance sector and had a quick promotion from deputy manager to manager. Regarding his approach to career progression, he recognised his tendency to make decisions, reflect on them and then change his mind: 'I tend to regret decisions I've made a lot of the time, say: 'Oh why did I do that? But I don't overly focus on it. I mean at the end of the day, you know, what's done is done and you can't go back and change it. So I try and learn for the future…'.

This on-going process of learning from evaluative self-reflection that is characteristic of this particular career decision making style is closely linked to the development of greater levels of self-awareness and self-knowledge, with individuals increasingly using this as the basis for future action and decisions. In summary, this style of decision making is characterised by: a recurrent and ongoing process of critical self-reflection; critical self-appraisal as a key concept; the identification and evaluation of individual needs, values and abilities; learning about self and the consequences of decisions; and increasing confidence, over time, with individuals becoming more aware of their particular skills and more able to identify career goals. Professional learning can play a key part in this process.

In both cases outlined, the individuals changed their career decisions and goals as a result of their engagement of learning, which had served as a trigger to re-evaluate their situation and overall career goal.

3.2 Strategic careerists

Representing a more focused career decision making style, a second approach to career decision making is a strategic approach which is based on cognitive processing. Here, individuals base their choices on a process of analysing, synthesizing, weighing up advantages and disadvantages, and setting plans to achieve goals. Through this process, decisions are primarily based on rational conditions (Baron, 2000). Individuals using this style of processing information and making decisions are competent in understanding a problem, considering and reflecting on options, and, perhaps more importantly, focusing on one particular solution (Sampson, Reardon, Peterson & Lenz, 2004). This particular approach is essentially the same as the 'rational' style identified by Harren (1979) and the term 'strategic' was used in an earlier relevant study of the development of engineers' work-related identities which identified four forms of strategic action in which in work may engage: identification; adjustment; strategic career; and redefinition (Brown, 2004).

All of the clients in the study who exemplified this approach to career decision making (that is, six in the final year follow-up) were focused on finding a career direction or a new focus. They had identified their ultimate career goal and were making conscious career decisions that were directly related to formal employment and designed to contribute to achieving their long term objective. Strategic careerists are committed to 'moving on' and see their careers as something they activity construct. Typically, they believe that their current position, and/or organisational attachment, represents just one phase of their career that involves relatively frequent changes. They are generally reconciled to the need to adapt and update their skills, knowledge and understanding constantly. For instance, one client had decided that she eventually wanted to run her own business after seeing the impact of working for a large, impersonal organisation on her brother. She targeted various smaller companies at a career fair for graduate employment and accepted one of the three jobs offered. Then she manoeuvred herself in different sections of her employing organisation at six monthly intervals, as she had worked out that exposure to varied employment contexts would provide her with the necessary preparation and skill development for realising her long-term career ambition of running her own business: 'I win business and provide the service they need and

get repeat business…which I think are really important skills if I want to run my own business eventually. So when I feel that I'm not learning any more and I can do the job with my eyes shut, then I will sort of move on.' This tenacious approach to working towards her ultimate goal is combined with the acceptance that success will require concerted effort on her part: 'I guess I need to grasp the job a lot more…I want to be successful and I will work really hard to try and achieve that…'.

One other example of a strategic decision making style relates to a client who, at the time of his career guidance interview, was working as the acting sales manager for a newspaper. He felt he was not being rewarded for the extra responsibility this involved and seemed generally discontent with his work. Before his careers interview, he had undertaken a considerable amount of research into alternative careers and had become very focused on becoming a Physiotherapist. To achieve this, he gave up his well-paid job and started to study a science-based access to higher education course on a full-time basis, together with related evening classes. In parallel with gaining the academic qualifications he required, he was also undertaking relevant work experience. His application for a physiotherapy degree was successful. He was clearly determined to achieve his goal, had assessed the risks and had set about maximising his chances of succeeding in what is a highly competitive occupational environment: 'I'm trying to keep an open mind, because there are so many different areas you could go into…a lot of the stuff we do at the moment is neurological and respiratory…you know, intensive care, multiple injury unit…stroke and Parkinson's and what-not. There's a huge amount of physio work involved in those areas…the report I got back from my placement…was along the lines of if there was a job going now, they'd be happy to offer it…sort of thing'.

This type of rational decision making style has been found to be beneficial in helping career undecided women make occupational and educational choices (Tinsley, Tinsley & Rushing, 2002). This appears to be the case for one woman in the study. She had established herself in a successful career (in information technology) before leaving to bring up her family. In planning her return to the labour market, she assessed her options and decided that self-employment represented the best option because it allowed her to reconcile child-care responsibilities with her own career development and learning needs. She decided, therefore, to train for garden design, with the intention of setting up as self-employed. Despite

experiencing considerable difficulties with the vocational training course on which she enrolled, she pursued this course of action through to completion.

These cases illustrate how strategic careerists make decisions based on rational choices. Once a goal has been determined, this becomes the primary focus, driving future action and decisions. In summary, this style of decision making is characterised by: engagement with cognitive processing of facts and feelings – analysis and synthesis – on a continuous basis; rational appraisal of information as the basis for action; steadfast focus on a career goal together with the belief in their ability to produce the desired outcomes; a tendency to marginalise emotions and their 'emotional self' in their decision-making; well developed problem solving skills – the ability to circumvent difficulties that impede progress; and predisposition to planning and planfulness. Harren (1979) argued that this style would result in the most effective careers decision, most likely to lead to a fulfilling career. However, even the five year perspective of this study is insufficient to form robust judgements about whether they are, or are likely to be in the future, more fulfilled in their career destinations than others using different styles of decision making. Indeed, in this study, no clear relationships emerged from analysis of data related to age, gender, highest qualification and employment.

With all three cases using the strategic decision-making style, professional learning became the means to the desired end goal (whether the learning was on-the-job or formal accredited courses) with individuals building in the need to learn, in order to progress. The two remaining styles of career decision making represent distinctly different styles of progressing careers compared with either evaluative or strategic approaches.

3.3 Aspirational careerists

Unlike clients engaged in either evaluative or strategic career decision making, three clients participating in the third year follow-up were pursuing interim goals which seemed almost tangential to the ultimate career aspiration, yet for them represented relevant preparation. Aspirational careerists adopt a style of career decision making based on focused, but distant career goals and their career decisions are inextricably intertwined with personal circumstances and priorities. They will take jobs to get by – that is, provide the necessary finance, which become a means to an end. Interim goals are sometimes, but not necessarily related to formal employment and achieving their ultimate career goals is definitely 'work in progress'.

One client who was well established in a highly successful career in retail management, became dissatisfied and determined to change direction. However, before she is ready to re-train for her aspirational career goal in events management, other important issues in her life need resolution. Currently, for example, she is focused on securing her house by paying off her mortgage. Then it appears likely that she will get married and start a family, before applying herself to re-focusing her career and achieving her ultimate career goal: 'I'm just beginning to think about a career…'.

One other client has a degree in fine art and aspired to work that would provide scope to use his creative energies. First, he wanted to be an artist and sell his paintings. He took a job as a media technician in a local school as he needed a source of income on which to live. After becoming bored with this job, he resigned without having any alternative employment. He took a job in a pub: 'just to pay the bills'. This lasted for only a few months, after which he spent about a year unemployed: 'signed on'. Then his father fell ill, so he took a temporary data entry administrative job that paid well, but which he described as: 'mind numbingly boring'. This was to save his father from having to worry about him as it provided the financial support needed to be an artist. He was still optimistic about making a viable living from selling his work. After a few months he left this job and took a permanent administration job with a roof tiling company. He described this in exactly the same way as his previous administrative job: 'mind numbingly boring', and resigned: 'I'd be letting myself down if I wasn't being creative, which is what is happening now. I'm letting myself down completely and I don't really care about money, or jobs, or things like that. I really care about whether I'm actually producing anything…if I'm not, it worries me, because I think it's something you can lose… …I'm thirty-one and I've not got the drive I had when I was a child…'. He switched his career focus from painting pictures to writing: 'I'm kind of disillusioned by painting in a way. I'd much prefer to write. A lot of me comes out when I write. Painting is something… …I can't beat the one I've just done… …I really can't get anything to look as good as that'. His 'career' plan is to 'take off' with a friend to the West Country to pursue his dreams and to find a lifestyle that suits him.

In summary, this approach to decision making is characterised by: the tendency to identify vaguely focused, but distant goals (personal and/or career); aspiring towards career goals that are often highly competitive and/or challenging to achieve; a career journey that typically

involves (often considerable) material sacrifice; and individual circumstances and priorities that impinge on the overall process – with the heart typically ruling the head.

The role of professional learning here is interesting. If it was necessary to secure the distant career goal, individuals espousing this career decision making style would not be averse to engagement with learning. They may even be prepared to engage with learning that was a requirement for the jobs they took to 'get by'. But motivation to start, and successfully complete, is unlikely to be as sharply focused as with the first two styles discussed.

3.4 Opportunistic careerists

The final style of career decision making describes those individuals who have taken opportunities that have presented themselves, however unexpected, and tried (sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully) to turn them to their advantage. This was the largest group in the longitudinal research sample, with eight illustrating this style in the final phase of data collection. Opportunist careerists have a very different approach to career decision-making compared to the other three styles explored above. They exploit available opportunities rather than make active choices about work (see for example Banks *et al.,* 1992). Clients' career plans could seem vague, undecided and uncertain. This resonates with the concept of 'planned happenstance' that encourages us to be receptive to randomly occurring opportunities that could be critical in shaping our careers (Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz*,* 1999; Hodkinson, Sparkes &Hodkinson*,* 1996 ; Hambly, 2007) and the need for practitioners to place greater importance on context (Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfiled & Earl, 2005). This style of decision making behaviour has certain similarities with Harren's (1979) 'intuitive' decision making style.

One example of a client applying this style of career decision making is that of a graduate student. Three years after her career guidance interview she was still unsure of her career direction. After completing her degree, she had worked abroad for six months: 'I just decided to go abroad. I'd been offered this job in Greece for six months over the summer season…'. On her return home, she completed some vocational qualifications in beauty therapy and sports massage to enhance her employability in complementary therapies. This led to her employment in a full-time job (in a women's prison) and in part-time employment (in a health spa). She continued to take full advantage of training opportunities (e.g. reflexology, computers, herbal therapy), but problems emerged in her full-time employment – she was

made a supervisor very quickly, which has caused some problems with other members of staff. This made her unhappy and she became ill with work-related stress. She had several ideas about what she would like to do next, most involving travel abroad: '…it's awful. I'm just thinking, New Zealand, Australia or America. I don't know really where I want to go. I don't know…I haven't got a clue. I'd go anywhere. I just want to find somewhere to go and I'll just go… …I feel I'm a free spirit girl'.

Another example is of a client who was made redundant from her early-years teaching position in school after twenty years. She immediately undertook further training courses to enable her to retain a foothold in education (as a learning support assistant; as a workplace assessor; and training teaching assistants). To supplement her income, she also took a job as a waitress. She then applied for a series of part-time jobs, capitalising on opportunities that presented themselves through local networks. In addition to part-time contracts in teaching, she worked backstage in a theatre. The variety suited her and she recognised that she had 'always fallen into things by accident' by using personal contacts and 'being in the right place at the right time'. However, after three years of working in this way, she has begun to feel dissatisfied and restless: 'I just really don't know what I want. That's the problem. And I just feel I've got myself in this rut… …I'm good at being a jack of all trades and master of none. I'm not very good at finishing off what I started… …I suppose I'll do two or four years of it…I felt like chucking it in altogether this morning…'.

Opportunistic careerists represent a very different style of behaviour and thought processes concerning career choices and decisions. Although opportunistic careerists often do not have a clear career goal, they are usually able to reconcile themselves with their employment situation, until a better option comes along. They deliberately keep their options open and delay decisions that may commit them. These individuals typically take what is available at a certain moment in time and there is a sense in which they are chosen for different types of employment, rather than making proactive, strategic choices themselves. In summary, this style of decision making is characterised by: the ability (often preference) to cope with high levels of uncertainty; reluctance to close off options; the use of intuition, rather than rationality, in making decisions (what feels 'right'); a predisposition to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves unexpectedly; resistance (sometimes active) to planning; and flexibility of approach.

So far as engagement with professional learning is concerned, these individuals are likely to stumble into learning, rather than build it into their career progression. As illustrated in one of the cases discussed, work-based learning offered the individual the chance to travel abroad and to get employment in the area she was living. Yet none of the jobs she had done so far had given her the job satisfaction for which she was seeking.

4. Discussion

The career biographies of adults are seldom linear. They often involve elements of learning, personal growth, regression, recovery, and perhaps further development as individuals move between images of what they are, had been in the past or think they might become. Many adults need, or desire, a change at some stage of their career and this often involves responding to a number of challenges, including that of engagement with professional learning. Indeed, analysis of data relating to the adult career trajectories revealed in this research have shown a complex interplay of a number of variables. These included: the way in which clients varied in respect of their personal circumstances (such as gender, age, ethnic origin, disability, attainments, etc.); the contexts in which they operated (their domestic situations, financial constraints; geographical locations, mobility, labour market status, learning and training opportunities, etc.); and the nature of support structures available (e.g. from partners, family and including the careers guidance support available). Whilst all of these factors are likely to effect and individual's predisposition to engage with professional learning, data from the longitudinal research indicates that this engagement is typically mediated by distinctly different career decision making styles. In trying to encourage and support adults to embrace professional learning, this needs to be taken into account. It is not simply a question of assessing a skills need, identifying a learning opportunity that would address this skills needs and ensuring the individual is aware of the opportunity. The career decision making styles that have emerged from this study indicate that an individual's motivation to seek out and commit to professional learning is complex and will depend on a number of factors.

Yet it is often assumed that adults do, or should, behave rationally when advancing their careers. At the heart of much careers guidance practice lies a model of human behaviour which is essentially rational, with the assumption that making careers choices essentially comprises a process where the individual first assesses their own abilities, aptitudes, achievements and aspirations; second, discovers what employment or education/training

opportunities represent the 'best fit' for their own profile; and then third become actively involved in matching these two sets of data to achieve the best fit. The career guidance practitioner plays a key role in this process by assisting the individual in their self-assessment and providing the expert information about the labour market that ensures a 'best fit' of the person with an occupational role and environment is secured. However, findings from the longitudinal study challenge, fundamentally, the notion that this type of approach is suitable for all. For some - those who use a strategic career decision-making approach – this paradigm is, indeed, entirely suitable. However, for others (probably a majority) it is not. The process of motivating workers to engage in continuous professional development will need to accommodate these differences, not only by careers guidance services but other forms of support available to adult workers, if the policy goal of up-skilling the workforce is to be achieved.

5. Conclusion

In an increasingly competitive world economy, governments search for ways to ensure workforces continuously engage in learning so that the skills mix is appropriate to meet all challenges. The recent longitudinal investigation of adult career trajectories has revealed a multiplicity of factors combining to produce complex patterns of movement. Careers guidance aims to support individuals at all stages of their career, to reflect on their skills, consider various options and embrace career change. Consequently, it has the potential to extend people's productive working lives, bringing considerable benefits to the individual, the economy and society, by avoiding under-employment in mid-career and a drift into semi-retirement or detachment. A substantial evidence base now exists that indicates the positive impact of careers guidance on the working lives of adults, which includes the research study discussed in this article. Reshaping careers, learning and identities is a daunting challenge for all individuals, both young people and adults, and careers guidance can play a major role in facilitating attempts to construct a new coherent career narrative, involving professional learning that can help drive these processes.

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