

Navigating the labour market: transitioning styles of adults receiving career guidance

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Abstract:

This chapter explores how individuals who participated in career guidance processes as adults navigated their subsequent career pathways over the subsequent four years. The labour market transitions of these adults were investigated through annual interviews over five years and the transitioning 'styles' (strategic, evaluative, aspirational and opportunist) they used as they approached, then dealt with, career transition and progression issues were examined.

Keywords

Career, transitions, progression, labour market

1 Introduction

The 'matching model' of career transition is dominant in the policy rhetoric around skills supply and demand. It assumes that optimal job choices are made when individuals have an understanding of their individual traits (e.g. abilities, aptitudes, interests, etc.); acquired knowledge of jobs and the labour market; and made an objective judgement about the best fit between these traits and factors. When individuals are in the 'right' jobs in this model, the jobs match their aptitudes and abilities. However, the value of the matching model (developed over a century ago) is increasingly questioned. Individuals do not always engage in technically 'rational' behaviours, often making decisions based on their own 'pragmatic rationality' (Hodkinson/Sparkes (1997), including responding to randomly occurring opportunities (Mitchell et al. 1999; Hambly 2007) in an 'intuitive' way (Harren (1979). Additionally, even if individuals wished to adopt a technically rational approach to career choice they are faced with the realities of the 'opportunity structures' available at specific times in particular places (Roberts, 2009). The constraints on career choice are particularly marked for socially disadvantaged groups facing sig-

nificant social, psychological and economic barriers to their progress (Leong et al. 1998). Further, it assumes a degree of labour market stability, with jobs and sectors having predictable requirements, to which the objectively measured abilities of individuals can be matched. Whilst this view may have had some validity fifty years ago, it is no longer true – with volatility and fluidity being defining characteristics of global labour markets.

Indeed, adults in employment who do not engage in substantive up-skilling or re-skilling for five or more years, increasingly run the risk of being locked into particular ways of working (Brown et al. 2010). They become vulnerable in the labour market, especially if their circumstances change. Other paradigms, concepts and strategies are therefore required that accommodate the increasing complexity of vocational transitions. This chapter is based on the findings of a five year longitudinal study of labour market transitions, which examined the effectiveness of career guidance, initially involving 50 individual cases. Characteristic patterns of behaviour associated with four distinct transitioning ‘styles’ (strategic, evaluative, aspirational and opportunist) were identified in how individuals approached, then dealt with, career transition and progression issues. The research highlights the range of goals, aspirations, achievements and identities that shape how adults interact with, and move through, labour markets. It emphasises the dynamic ways many adults engage with vocational learning and development pathways, sometimes with transformational shifts in perspective as their careers unfold, often involving up-skilling and/or re-skilling (Brown et al. 2010). How individuals navigate career pathways was explored, with concepts of transitioning styles used to investigate how individuals coped with stressful labour market transitions. The chapter concludes with a critique of the dominant career transition paradigm that currently underpins the practice of formal career support of individuals navigating their labour market transitions.

2 Labour market transitions of adults receiving career guidance

2.1 Context and methodology

This chapter examines the career trajectories of adults whose progress through education and work in England was tracked from 2003 to 2008. The longitudinal study illustrated how adults who had had career guidance subsequently developed their careers, through use of one of four career decision-making styles: evaluative, strategic, aspirational and opportunist. These decision-making styles mediated behavioural responses to career progression,

learning and development. The context for the research was recognition of the potential strategic role for career guidance services in advancing lifelong learning goals and supporting active labour market policies; and the lack of compelling evidence regarding the nature of effective guidance and its benefits. Hence the aim of the research was to use a qualitative, longitudinal case study approach to investigate the nature of effective career guidance and how it can add value to post-compulsory learning and enhance employability.

The overarching research question was what constitutes effective career guidance for adults in a range of different contexts and whether participants' views of the effectiveness of particular guidance interventions change over time. This chapter focuses upon adults who had actively sought formal careers support, whereas many individuals make pragmatic career decisions without accessing such support (Hodkinson/Sparkes 1997). Ball (2003) outlined how in decisions made by young people they mistrusted 'cold' official knowledge and relied instead on 'hot' knowledge that connected more directly with their life experience. Harren (1979) in a study of college students' career decision making identified three styles: 'rational', a logical and systematic approach to decisions; 'intuitive', with more reliance on internal affective states; and 'dependent', where decisions were 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. However, all these studies concerned young people starting out on their careers rather than older adults thinking of making a career change or in the process of transition.

In this chapter, however, the focus is on tracking the longitudinal 'trace' of career guidance interventions in adults' careers over four years. Four distinct styles of decision making were identified during career enactment – the term 'enactment' is used to emphasise that we were looking at the decision making process over time, not in relation to a single event. The study compared the nature of career guidance interventions in different professional contexts; examined what, exactly, proved to be useful to participants; explored the key features of career guidance interviews; and compared the perspectives of participants, practitioners and 'expert witnesses' on career guidance interviews and their effectiveness to participants in the search for new understandings of effectiveness of career guidance practice (Bimrose et al. 2004, p. 5). The research emphasised the 'user voice' in the five annual sets of interviews. Grounded theory provided the methodological underpinning of the research, whereby the phasing of the data collection enabled findings and insights from one stage to inform subsequent stages (Glaser/Strauss 1967; Strauss/Corbin, 1998). Fifty in-depth case studies were undertaken in the first year of investigation. These compared: the participant's perceptions of a

careers guidance episode; the practitioner's perceptions of the same careers guidance episode; and the perceptions of an independent third party ('expert witnesses' with 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 participant, the practitioner and the careers guidance context; and finally, questionnaires completed by individual participants, careers guidance practitioners and 'expert witnesses' about the careers guidance interviews (expert witnesses did not observe the interviews 'live' as this may have proved to be inhibiting for participants. Rather, they listened to digital recordings of the interview and also had access to a typed transcript of the interview).

One year after the initial case study interview and for the follow-up studies participants from the initial phase were contacted by telephone annually. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. The attrition rate was as follows: 45 of the 50 participants were successfully contacted for the first follow-up; 36 for the second; 30 the third; and 29 for the final follow-up. Methods used to contact the participants, the response rates and the characteristics of those participants successfully contacted have been detailed elsewhere (Bimrose et al. 2005). The follow-up interviews tracked participants' progress and career trajectories, their perception of the careers guidance received and its role in their career development and investigated barriers to progression, key influences and the participants' views of their career choices and decisions (Bimrose et al. 2008). In this chapter we only draw on the data of the 29 individuals for whom we have a full five interviews, which enabled us to examine their career decision-making styles over time. Of the 29 only 23 could be considered to have an identifiable career decision-making style, with the remaining six not active participants in the labour market, principally because of health reasons or caring and family responsibilities.

Both deductive and inductive analysis of data was undertaken. A framework adapted from previous guidance research was used for the deductive analysis of each careers guidance episode. This was developed using inductive analysis of digital recordings of interviews and open coding to capture emergent themes. Analysis of questionnaire responses and interviews were undertaken using qualitative data analysis software. Data were coded independently and compared by 'expert witnesses' and field researchers. By using this approach, a model of careers support in-action was identified (Bimrose et al. 2004), together with evidence of perceptions and outcomes of useful careers guidance (Bimrose et al. 2008).

2.2 Research design and methods

A qualitative, longitudinal, case study approach was used, combining elements of psychological and sociological approaches to assessing effective guidance in a variety of guidance contexts. It focused on: different perceptions of the career guidance interview by the client, the practitioner and an 'expert witness'; the process and outcome(s) of the career guidance interviews; the clients' current situation, their preferred future(s) and the action necessary to achieve the next stage; and the professional contexts in which career guidance is delivered. The four phases of data collection allowed the findings and insights from each stage to inform subsequent stages (Glaser/Strauss, 1967). During Phase 1 protocols for data collection were developed using two pilot studies. In Phase 2 data was collected from a sample of fifty case studies in a variety of professional contexts. During the third phase of the research, data was collected from clients, who were followed up about 12 months after the guidance interview, using postal survey, telephone interviews and/or (where appropriate) email contact. The purpose of this follow-up was to track clients' perceptions of their progress, changes in identity and to identify key events associated with these changes. Results from this phase of the research shaped data collection in phase 4, in which clients were followed up annually through a further three cycles of data gathering.

Fifty case studies were completed in the first year of data collection in a variety of career guidance contexts, which included Connexions, Information, Advice and Guidance Partnerships and Jobcentre Plus; Higher Education; Further Education; Community/outreach career guidance and not-for-profit organisations; and private career organisations and organisations offering guidance on a funded basis in the workplace. The data sources for each case study were: organisational sources (reports, mission statements, researcher observations, managers, practitioners, publicity leaflets, etc.); digital recordings of the career guidance interviews and typed transcriptions; questionnaires completed by individual clients, guidance practitioners and 'expert witnesses' about the career guidance interviews; and questionnaires collecting brief background data on the client, the practitioner and the context in which career guidance was delivered was collected from the client, the practitioner and an organisational representative, respectively. 'Expert witnesses' had significant experience of delivering and/or assessing career guidance and they listened to digital recordings of the interviews and were able to read typed transcripts.

The research approach allowed participants to articulate, from their own perspective, the meaning and significance of the career guidance event. Three questionnaires on their perceptions of the career guidance interview

allowed discrepancies or conflicts from clients, practitioners and expert witnesses to be documented. Questions focused on the affective dimensions of the interview (i.e. the relationship between the client and practitioner); the behavioural dimensions (i.e. the practitioners' behaviour and conduct, including strategies and skills); the cognitive dimensions (i.e. client changes in understandings and/or perceptions); the combination of affective and behavioural dimensions; and whether the interview had been useful. Field researchers were provided with a prompt sheet, to ensure that they were giving similar explanations about what a particular question meant.

Five different organisational contexts were targeted and agreement to conduct the research was sought from managers, practitioners and clients. The ethical principle of 'informed consent' was strictly operated at every point of the three stage process of organising field visits. Because of the personal nature of information disclosed by clients during guidance together with the possible perception by practitioners that, in some way, the research might result in an assessment of their competence, no other approach would have been viable. This may, however, have resulted in some sample bias, since all participants were given the option of withdrawing after they had been fully informed about the research requirements. Every practitioner and client was asked to sign a consent form and clients were asked to provide contact details, so that they could be followed up over the next four years. Whilst a primary objective for the research was to secure varied and interesting organisational settings, the complexities of securing participants meant that clients and practitioners were not specifically targeted in terms of race, gender or disability, length of experience (practitioners) or employment status (clients). However, considerable diversity was, in fact, evident amongst participants.

The approach to the data analysis utilised grounded theory method, which offers systematic and rigorous procedures for interpreting and analysing rich qualitative data (Charmaz, 1995, 2006; King/Horrocks, 2010). Analytical coding involved the differentiation and combination of data, together with reflection on this information. The analysis made use of responses to the three open-ended questions from the 49 questionnaires completed by clients who found their interviews 'useful', together with corresponding responses from the practitioner and expert witness questionnaires. These questions focused on whether the client had found the interview useful, and if so, how; what stood out about the interview; and provided an opportunity to elaborate further on any aspect of the interview. From the responses to these questions, the nature of useful career guidance together with its key features was revealed. The practitioner interventions from each of the 49 digitally recorded career guidance interviews clients found 'useful' formed the centre-piece of the analysis. From the interview transcripts, the detailed characteristics of 'useful'

career guidance interviews were identified, including commentary upon the different strategies used by clients and their career transition decision-making styles. Analysis of both the questionnaire responses and interviews were undertaken using QSR NVivo 2, a qualitative data analysis software package.

Analysis of the open-ended questionnaire responses revealed 12 descriptive categories of what clients found 'useful' in their guidance interviews (Bimrose et al. 2008), drawing on the perspectives of clients, practitioners and expert witnesses from across the sample as a whole. Every stage of coding was independently moderated, to ensure validity. A similar but more intensive process was used to analyse the interview transcripts. Initially, an independent moderator read the first 10 interview transcripts, and focused upon the practitioner interventions. Different elements of the interviews were categorised using codes. The transcripts were then checked and coded independently by a second member of the research team and loaded into NVivo. This process was repeated for a second set of 10 transcripts and then a sample of coded transcripts was independently moderated by two further members of the research team. Any discrepancies (approximately 10%) were discussed and a final code agreed. This process was continued for all the interview transcripts. In total, all transcripts coded by the moderator were also moderated by one other member of the research team, whilst 20% were independently moderated by a third member of the research team and a further 10% were independently moderated by a fourth member of the research team. Forty codes were identified from the interview transcripts that were categorised under broader headings for a more in-depth analysis. Further detail on the coding and analysis is documented in Bimrose et al. (2008).

The qualitative research methodology investigated real life in context and concerned itself with vivid, dense and full descriptions of the phenomena studied (Polkinghorne, 2005). On a reflexive note, the team of eight researchers, who undertook the data collection, were all female, White and experienced in research, with six, including the five 'expert witnesses', also experienced in the delivery and assessment of career guidance. Moderation of the expert witnesses was undertaken, on a random basis, by two senior researchers in the team. As researchers in the qualitative tradition, the researchers were aware that they were themselves participants in the research process, who tried to remain aware of our own reactions and emotions whilst undertaking the research. The researchers felt privileged to have been permitted glimpses into the lives of the participants, and felt the responsibility for representing the participants' stories as accurately and as powerfully as possible.

Hypotheses and key concepts were generated during the data collection and analysis. Methods of data collection were used that enabled immediate

recording. Theoretical sampling occurred to maximise comparability. Coding of data occurred simultaneously with its collection, allowing the focus to change and leads to be pursued, and the substantive literature review was delayed. The researchers also tried to remain constantly alert to the effects of their own behaviour and reactions, together with the behaviour of the participants. These are all identified as characteristics of grounded theory method (Charmaz, 1995; Strauss/Corbin, 1998). It also offered a framework for combining elements of quantitative methods (structured questions for the collection of demographic data for descriptive statistics) with qualitative methods (in-depth, open-ended interviews for coding). Other practices of grounded theory were relevant to our inquiry including: continually questioning gaps in the data; stressing open processes in conducting research; and recognising the importance of context and social structure (Moustakas, 1994). Consistent with grounded theory method, no formal hypothesis for testing was identified. Rather, general exploratory questions were investigated: What is effective careers guidance? What are the barriers to effective guidance? How can effective practice be encouraged and supported?

The nature of the longitudinal study permitted researchers to gain insights into individuals' circumstances and decision-making styles over time. The use of interviews enabled immediate recording and provided in-depth accounts of participants' contexts, as well as their career trajectories. A key challenge was the quality of the relationship established with participants, since the frankness and honesty with which participants disclose their stories will depend, at least in part, on the extent to which they trust the researcher. Fostering a relationship between a researcher and their participants is essential for gaining access to the subjective experience of participants. Researchers followed up and interviewed the same clients each year to ensure consistency and build upon relationships already established. Interview transcripts illustrate how researchers established good working relationships with the clients.

As preparation, researchers reviewed the transcripts of previous interviews to familiarise themselves with the participants' career histories. Clients seemed to appreciate the personal details that researchers recalled (such as asking how their children were getting on). This assisted in building and maintaining the client-researcher relationship and in establishing trust and helping clients feel comfortable. Indeed, clients were pleased, often eager, to talk to researchers about their progress and activities over the previous year. Building and maintaining relationships with clients also involved responding to participants' requests for help. In qualitative research, maintaining the boundary between research and intervention can be challenging. One proposed solution is to incorporate an 'ethic of care' in research practice, acknowledging that the research process can, itself, be of benefit to research

participants (Haverkamp, 2005). A caring relationship between the researcher and the research participant is given priority. In this research, helpful responses to clients included: offering information on where to get further help (such as informing clients of different organisations offering guidance and encouraging clients to return to the original source of guidance) and providing information on funding for courses.

2.3 Career decision making styles

Career decisions are amongst the most important people make throughout their lives, having significant implications for psychological, social and economic well-being (Gati/Tal 2008). They also figure amongst the most common vocational problems (Amir/Gati 2006 ; Osipow 1999) with difficulties in making career decisions resulting in avoiding the process altogether, halting it, or making a decision that is not ideal (Gati et al. 1996). It has been suggested that the primary goal of career guidance is to help participants make better decisions and that career decision making should be given more prominence in practice interventions (Gati/Tal 2008). Various studies provide insights to different aspects of career decision making: cultural dimensions of decision-making difficulties (Wei-Cheng 2004); the influence of career maturity (Creed/Patton 2003); the role of values (Colozzi 2003) and levels of confidence as predictors of career decision-making (Paulsen/Betz 2004).

Given the importance of the career decision-making process, gaining an understanding of the complexities inherent in this process is particularly important for those offering support to adults attempting to navigate their own careers pathways. Without an understanding of how and why adults formulate more or less developed career plans and whether and how they seek to enact, adapt or change them, and how the unfolding career decisions of individuals respond to and engage with different sets of opportunities in education, training and employment, as well as the factors that commonly operate as barriers to progression, there is a danger that those seeking to support adults may become part of the problem, rather than part of a solution. Harren (1979) showed that career decision making has 'rational' and 'intuitive' dimensions but can also be influenced by significant others, including friends and family. This research emphasised how some individuals take greater personal responsibility for decision making, whereas others share or even project that responsibility onto others. Any decisions about career enactment also have to be placed in a particular spatial, labour market and socio-cultural context – individuals are taking decisions within particular 'opportunity structures' and their decisions and aspirations are further framed by their understanding of such structures (Roberts 2009).

The longitudinal study into the effectiveness of career guidance reported here 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, training and employment over a five year period (Bimrose et al. 2004). The typology of career decision making styles (evaluative, strategic, aspirational and opportunist) was identified during the first two years of investigation. The stability of these styles was scrutinised over the following three years. In only one case was the career decision making style that was initially attributed to a participant amended as a result of examination of data from subsequent phases of the investigation (in this case, from a strategic style to evaluative). Additionally, two participants who were experiencing barriers to progression in the early part of the study subsequently began to espouse distinct career decision making strategies as a result of their changed circumstances (both demonstrating opportunist styles). Given the nature of the qualitative data from which these styles were derived, the typology requires further validation (and this is currently being undertaken with almost three hundred students in Ireland and six hundred students in China) – though two of the styles which have been identified from analysis of this research data (that is, strategic and opportunistic) correspond closely to two of the three styles developed by Harren (1979).

Whilst the typology is offered tentatively, it nevertheless provides powerful insights into different approaches adopted by participants in attempting to navigate their way around the labour market. Some implications of these styles for individual engagement and continuing support for adults in subsequent learning and development are also explored.

2.4 Transitioning styles: evaluative careerists

Evaluative career decision making is reflected in the psychological literature on emotional intelligence, whereby individuals can 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 for some individuals (Ball 1996). Individuals using this decision making style are undertaking a process of learning about themselves and the consequences of their decisions. Through a process of self-reflection and evaluation, individuals become: more comfortable and confident in their decisions; aware of their particular skills; and are able to identify preferred outcomes and goals (Gati/Saka 2001). The career narratives of six of the 29 research participants in the final phase of the longitudinal study demonstrate strong elements of this approach to career decision making. They had engaged with a process of critical self-reflection and self-

evaluation that comprised periods of (sometimes prolonged) review and reflection, where career decisions were often seen as provisional, although they could also potentially contribute to a longer term career goal. A degree of uncertainty and ambiguity about career plans and how to enact them was evident throughout, partly because there was always the possibility that the process of reflection might indicate the value of a change of direction and a different future. Interestingly review is often seen in positive terms (ensuring career plans are current), but if review occurs too frequently and/or does lead to changes of direction, the process could easily be construed negatively as prevarication or indecision.

An example of this style of career decision-making was a woman, who was a single parent in receipt of benefits at the time of her case study interview, and was taking the first steps in thinking about returning to work following a personal upheaval. In her one-to-one careers guidance session in the first year of the 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 circumstances arising from her marriage break-down. The careers guidance interview explored her circumstances and future employment aspiration to enrol on a vocational training course. After the interview, she had been unable to enrol in vocational training because of the lack of suitable local provision, but instead had opted to enrol on an adult education course. Through a process of evaluation and self-reflection she recognised that this option had had a positive impact on her self-confidence and helped her understand that she 'loved learning'. After successful completion of the course and, as a direct result of this realisation, she applied for a course at her local higher education institution which fitted in with her childcare responsibilities. However, in the final year of the research study, this individual had been unable to take-up the offer of higher education because of financial constraints. She had not, however, given up. Even though her immediate financial future was uncertain, she was determined to engage in some learning and development that would enable her to realise her career aim of teaching at some stage in the future and in the meantime she was considering enrolling on evening courses that were 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 there were practical issues to overcome, principally his existing financial (mortgage) commitments. He wanted to remain in the same geographical area and, as he did not drive, he was dependent on public transport. 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 that it was, after all, financially and practically feasible. He therefore applied, successfully, for a teacher training course. However, a few months into the training course, he decided that teaching had not been the right choice and left:

I had the half term in the spring and...I kind of realised that... 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 was quickly promoted to a senior management position. Regarding his approach to career progression, he was able to recognise 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 self-reflection characteristic of this career decision making style can be 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. However, it does depend upon the self-reflection being based upon purposive learning from experience rather than being a reinforcement of existing ways of thinking and acting.

In summary, this style of decision making is characterised by: a recurrent and on-going 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. Where the process works well it can lead to increasing confidence, over time, with individuals becoming more aware of their particular skills and more able to identify career goals. In the cases of individuals identified with this strategy the guidance intervention had provided an opportunity to engage with processes of review, reflection and self-appraisal and they continued to review their progress in these terms in subsequent research interviews and the approach adopted following the original guidance intervention acted as a guide as to how they should reflect upon their developing career.

It may be, however, that some individuals would benefit from further ca-

reer guidance and support as the changes of plans could undermine confidence and having someone with whom to talk these issues through could be beneficial. Personal learning and development based upon experience can play a key part in this process. In both the examples explored above, the individuals changed their career decisions and goals as a result of their engagement with formal learning programmes, which had served as a trigger to re-evaluate their situation, their career and learning identities and overall career goals. It may appear that individuals are being indecisive, sometimes over a long period of time, and they could be (and often will be) regarded as non-completers of courses. However, engaging with a particular form of learning, thinking and practising in new ways, can help them clarify their thinking, often re-directing them in their careers. Whilst this behaviour could be (and often is) construed negatively, for the individuals concerned, these behaviour patterns can be part of a broader process of personal development and learning that eventually leads to greater clarity about career goals and how to achieve them. In the second example above, the 'failure' to become a teacher actually acted as a powerful reinforcement to commitment to the previous occupational identity. Previously, the choice had been between his current identity and an imagined 'better' alternative. The career guidance intervention and subsequent actions had put the imagined alternative to the test and a number of aspects of 'becoming a teacher' had led to a further reappraisal of both identities and a return to the previous trajectory. Where self-appraisal is allied to learning from experience then a career enactment strategy of the evaluative careerist appears a viable means of clarifying a career direction.

2.5 Transitioning styles: strategic careerists

A strategic approach represents a more focused career decision making style, based on cognitive processing. Here, individuals base their choices on a process of analysing, synthesizing and weighing up advantages and disadvantages, then setting plans to achieve goals. Through this process, decisions are primarily based on rational considerations (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 et al. 2004). This approach is essentially the same as the 'rational' style identified by Harren (1979). 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 those in work may engage: identification; adjustment; strategic career; and redefinition (Brown 2004a). Those individuals following a strategic career have initially committed to a particular occu-

pation, and can be single-minded in achieving that initial goal even if a number of other steps are required. However, once the initial goal has been achieved, they are subsequently likely to continue to be interested in career progression, if avenues are available that build on their existing skill set in new ways. They are seeking to build their career strategically, enhancing their existing skill set, often following accepted progression pathways (for example, becoming a team leader, specialist, tutor, manager etc.).

All of the participants in the study who exemplified this approach to career decision making (six of the 29 participants in the final year follow-up) were intent on finding a career direction or a new focus. They had identified their ultimate career goal and were making conscious career decisions designed to contribute to achieving their long term objective. Strategic careerists are committed to 'moving on' and see their careers as something they actively 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 continue to update their skills, knowledge and understanding. For instance, one participant 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 graduate careers fair and accepted one of the three jobs offered. Then she manoeuvred herself through 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:

....really important skills if I want to run my own business eventually. So when I feel that I'm not learning anymore and I can do the job with my eyes shut, then I will sort of move on.

This tenacious approach to working towards an 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...'.

Another example of a strategic decision making style relates to a participant who, at the time of his careers guidance interview, was working as the acting sales manager for a newspaper. He felt he was not being rewarded for the extra responsibility and seemed generally discontented with his work. Before his careers interview, he researched 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... ..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 et al. 2002). One woman in the longitudinal study exemplified this tendency. She had established herself in a successful career (in information technology) before leaving the labour market to bring up her family. In planning her return, she assessed her options and decided upon self-employment in order to reconcile child-care responsibilities with her own career development and learning needs. She decided, therefore, to train for garden design, with the goal of establishing herself 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 individuals making clear choices and committing to a course of action can act as a powerful driver to achieving their initial career goals. However, what is interesting about the strategic careerist is that they remain aware of themselves as individuals with particular skill sets rather fully identifying with their chosen occupation to such an extent that it largely shuts off consideration of other alternatives. For a strategic careerist once a goal has been determined, this becomes the primary focus, driving future action and decisions. However, the individual can subsequently actively consider 'moving on' and achieving a new goal. In summary, this style of decision making is characterised by: engagement with cognitive processing of facts and feelings – analysis and synthesis – on a continuing 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 a predisposition to planning and planfulness.

The 'strategic careerist', as others, still has to operate within the existing opportunity structures, and can take advantage of unexpected opportunities, but the key is that they are usually operating with an idea that they are building their skill sets in line with the requirements of a future identity rather than

focusing purely on their existing identity. In the examples given the individuals were 'looking ahead' and considering forms of learning and development that would help them in the future. 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, it may be that the drive associated with this approach to career development itself creates a certain restlessness whereby the individual is always interested in the next stage of 'becoming' rather than accepting 'being' in the current position

With all the three individuals using the strategic decision-making style outlined above, a commitment to personal learning and development acted as the means to the desired end goal and was a driver of their career progression. Significantly, they saw learning and development as going beyond formal provision and were well aware of the opportunities offered by learning through challenging work, learning through interaction (including building personal networks), learning through applying their skills, knowledge and understanding in a range of different contexts (Brown, 2009). They regarded this as an investment in their own human resource – they were aware they were developing their skill set and knowledge base.

The relationship between learning and career goals for strategic careerists appears straight forward in such cases. However, two things stand out which might give pause for thought before recommending this as a universal course of action. First, all three exemplars had chosen paths where achievement of career success was not just dependent upon reaching the initial goal: the challenges for these individuals would then be to make a success of running your own business, being a garden designer or being a physiotherapist – all identities which need developing after initial achievement. Some people might find the continuing uncertainty difficult to handle. Secondly, in the health service in the UK all individuals are encouraged to build their 'strategic careers' to such an extent that some radiographers and nurses felt oppressed by the need in their annual reviews to express further career aspirations even when they wanted a period of career stability where they actually wanted to say they were happy to continue doing what they were currently doing (Brown 2004b). So elevating strategic career decision-making as a universal model might be undesirable, even for those individuals adopting a primarily calculative, rational approach to career progression. The problem is that much policy related to careers support is predicated on just such a calculative, rational model, even if only a relatively small number of people make a series of career progression decisions in this way. Hodkinson/Sparkes (1997); Ball (2003); Harren (1979) and Roberts (2009) all argue in their different ways that even initial career choices are circumscribed in ways that mean technical rationality is just not a helpful way of looking at the career decision processes of many

individuals.

2.6 Transitioning styles: aspirational careerists

A small number of research participants (three out of the 29 in the fifth year of the research study) were pursuing interim career goals which seemed almost tangential to their ultimate career aspiration, yet for them either represented relevant preparation or were regarded as unavoidable. 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. The aspirations may be career or personal and relate to performing, self-employment or any 'dream'. They will take jobs to 'get by' – that is, provide the necessary finance to keep the aspiration alive, work becomes a means for striving for a distant goal. Interim goals are sometimes, but not necessarily, related to formal employment and achieving their ultimate career goal is definitely a 'work in progress'.

One participant, who was well established in a highly successful career in retail management, became dissatisfied and was 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 needed resolution. Currently, for example, she is focused on 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...'

Another participant has a degree in fine art and aspired to work that would provide scope to use his creative energies. Over the five years of the study, he first wanted to be an artist and sell his paintings. A job as a media technician in a local school provided him with 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 a few months, after which he spent a year unemployed. Then his father fell ill, so he took a temporary data entry administrative job that paid well, but was: 'mind numbingly boring'. This action was to save his father from having to worry about him as it provided the financial support needed to be an artist. At this point, 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 after a short period of time:

I'd be letting myself down if I wasn't being creative, which is what is happen-

ing 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' was to 'take off' to pursue his dreams and to find a lifestyle that suited 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 learning and development 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 relates to the need to acquire accreditation to do a job that provides the material basis for survival. Whilst positive learning outcomes from these types of engagement with learning cannot be ruled out, a certain level of ambivalence is likely to be characteristic of these learners who are quite instrumental in the approach they adopt.

2.7 Transitioning styles: opportunist careerists

The fourth style of career decision making identified 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 research sample, with eight out of 29 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, for further examples of this approach). Participants' 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 et al. 1999; Hambly 2007) and the need for practitioners to place greater importance on context. This type of decision making behaviour has certain similarities with Harren's (1979) 'intuitive' decision making style.

One example of a participant 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 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. She took a full-time job (in the security sector) while trying to build up her therapeutic experience in part-time employment. She continued to take full advantage of short course training opportunities relevant to her employment, but problems emerged in her full-time position when she was promoted quickly, causing some problems with other members of staff. This made her unhappy. 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 participant 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.

Opportunist careerists represent a very different style of behaviour and thought processes concerning career choices and decisions. Although they

often do not have a clear career goal, they are usually able to reconcile themselves with their employment situation, because they assume that a better option will come 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 (and 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 learning and development is concerned, these individuals are likely to stumble into learning, rather than build it into their career progression. As illustrated in the cases discussed, learning could be linked to formal programmes, learning while working, by drawing on personal networks or just taking advantage of learning in different contexts, for example, when individuals linked the chance to travel abroad with linked employment opportunities. The disadvantage of such *ad hoc* approaches to learning and career progression was that as in one of the cases discussed above none of the jobs she had done so far had given her the job satisfaction for which she was seeking and her search continued.

3 Conclusion

Evidence from this longitudinal study illustrates how clients deploy varied decision-making styles. Whilst these findings are still tentative, it would seem that a key question that emerges for practice from this finding relates to the extent to which current frameworks that guide career practice accommodate the varied ways that clients approach their career development. A dominant influence on current career guidance practice appears to be the matching paradigm, which derives from differential psychology. Its originator (Parsons, 1909) postulated that occupational choices are made when people have achieved first, an accurate understanding of their individual traits; second, knowledge of jobs and the labour market; and third, made a rational and objective judgement about the relationship between these two groups of facts. The significant and continuing influence of this approach on the practice of careers guidance was noted by Krumboltz (1994) who suggested that most current practice was 'still governed by the three-part theory outlined by Frank Parsons (1909)' (p.14). Savickas (1997) concurred: 'Parson's paradigm for guiding occupational choice remains to this day the most widely used ap-

proach to career counselling' (p.150). Indeed, findings from this longitudinal study into effective guidance indicate that career practitioners in England are still heavily reliant on this approach (Bimrose, et al., 2004; Bimrose/Barnes, 2006).

However, the theory contains serious flaws (Mitchell/Krumboltz, 1996; Osipow/Fitzgerald, 1996; Sharf, 1997). One is that the approach is based on an essentially rational model of human behaviour, in which individuals are predisposed to making rational decisions based on objective, scientific facts. This lends itself comfortably to the formulation of 'action plans', or 'summaries of career guidance', at the end of an interview, where typically clients and practitioners agree a career goal and the plan of action necessary to take this forward.

Not all the decision-making styles identified in this research are necessarily sympathetic to this approach. In his review of empirical literature on career decision making, Krieshok (1998) concluded that the decision-making process does not, in reality, resemble the completely rational and conscious process typically embraced in practice. The 'opportunists', for example, who prefer to leave their options open so that they can respond to chances that present themselves, are likely to feel uncomfortable with a resolutely rational approach to careers work. As one research participant observed: 'I think it's nice if you don't plan too much, because then you're open to suggestions and things like that.' The challenge for practice is to ensure that frameworks guiding work with clients are sufficiently flexible and responsive to the varied decision-making preferences that clients bring to career work. Career interventions are not quick and simple and practitioners need to 'allow for less certainty in outcomes, less decidedness, and less surety' (Krieshok, 2001, p.215).

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 learning and development. However, adult career trajectories are influenced by a complex interplay of variables, including 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 these factors are likely to affect an individual's predisposition to engage with further learning and development, data from this longitudinal research indicates that engagement is

typically mediated by distinctly different career decision making styles for adults who participated in a formal career guidance process and who then annually reviewed their subsequent progress over the next four years. In trying to encourage and support adults to embrace learning and development, these different career decision making styles 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, ensuring the individual is aware of the opportunity and feels properly supported. The career decision making styles that were developed from this study indicate that an individual's motivation to seek out and commit to learning and development is complex and will depend on a number of factors that need to be taken into account.

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 career 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 generically suitable. For some (perhaps even a minority) – of those who use a strategic career decision-making approach – this paradigm is, indeed, entirely suitable. However, for others (possibly a majority) it is not. For policies designed to support the up-skilling and re-skilling of the labour force to be successfully implemented, these differences will need to be accommodated.

Only a minority of adults make use of formal career guidance provision so a question may be raised about the generalizability of the findings to all adults. However, the point which is clearly generalizable is that there are a range of career decision-making styles other than the career decision-making approach around which much career guidance is still organised. Additionally, however, specifically to address this question, two follow-up studies are being conducted in Ireland and China.

The longitudinal investigation of adult career trajectories has revealed a multiplicity of factors combining to produce complex patterns of movement. Effective careers guidance aims to support individuals at all stages of their career, to reflect on their skills, consider various options and embrace career change. It needs to ensure that it incorporates research findings, including those relating to career decision-making styles, which will enable it to en-

hance its effectiveness. A substantial evidence base now exists that indicates the positive impact of careers guidance on the working lives of adults. Reshaping careers, learning and identities is a daunting challenge for everyone and careers guidance can play a major role in helping adults construct new coherent career narratives, if it takes account of differences in career decision making styles, when considering how learning can help drive these processes.

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