

What Goes On in Adult Guidance? - A Qualitative Investigation of Practice

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This small scale pilot study into the nature and practice of adult guidance interviews arose as the result of three strands of influence: first of all the author's involvement with the teaching of guidance theory; secondly the nature of a number of questions that are being asked about the place of vocational guidance in today's world; and finally a growing interest in the application of qualitative research methods to understanding guidance processes.

Introduction

The author has a long term involvement in the initial training of careers advisers and as part of this has published occasional papers on the nature of guidance and guidance theory (Lines, 1998, 1997, 1996, 1994, 1993). In this training, guidance theory has had its traditional place, i.e. students are made familiar with various theoretical perspectives and are then expected to apply these to their practice. In other words, the training and learning are theory led and this supposedly enables students new to the field to orientate themselves and to start developing their skills. Some authors have recently begun to question the efficacy of this approach (Collin, 1996) and furthermore there is also evidence that these theories are quickly modified or abandoned as students move into professional practice and begin to develop their own approaches (Watson, 1994). The traditional role of theory then is beginning to be questioned. However, whether or not it has a value in the

initial orientation to a field, it is certainly true that with some notable exceptions (Wilden & La Gro, 1998; Clarke, 1994) there has been little research into exactly what does go on in actual guidance interviews.

The second strand of influence has been the recent publication of a number of papers which have debated the changing role of guidance today (e.g. Brown, 1999; Fielding, 1999; Roberts, 1997; Collin & Watts, 1996). These writers argue that traditional approaches to guidance are increasingly inadequate in a rapidly changing and uncertain world. If this is so, and the nature of vocational guidance does indeed have to alter in order to be relevant in a new scenario, then it becomes vital to be clear about how it is practised now in order that changes and developments can be based upon actuality rather than upon supposition.

Finally, Audrey Collin in her article examining the tensions between theory and practice makes a strong case for abandoning traditional positivist modes of research and theorising as a basis for understanding and developing practice:

'However, academic research and theory will almost always come too late to be practical, so counsellors must also engage in their own research and theorising. The newly developing interpretive and collaborative research methodologies, many of them compatible with counsellors' values, will ease this task for them.' (Collin, 1996, p.77).

This study then has arisen from a desire to find out what the basis of practice might be and to try to examine it without using the lens of theory. For this reason a data led interpretive approach was chosen in order that the interviews could tell their own story. The author wished to address two broad research questions:

- Is an interpretive analysis capable of casting light on what is happening in practice?
- What do the guidance interviews of experienced practitioners look like?

Some underpinning assumptions

In any study which uses interview data it is always important to be clear about the assumptions being made about the meaning and status of the data and its analysis. At one extreme somebody adopting a positivist stance would assume that it is possible for an interview to give access to the 'real' circumstances of the participants' world if the interview construction and conditions are carefully controlled. At the other extreme, somebody taking a social constructionist stance would argue that an interview is a construction of the two participants and that it is specific to a particular context and cannot tell us much about their social worlds outside of the interview. The stance taken in this study is the same as that identified by Miller and Glassner as being part way between these two positions, i.e. an interactionist stance (Miller & Glassner, 1997, p.99).

Researchers adopting this position do not accept the positivist view that there is a direct link between the interview and the 'real' world but as Miller and Glassner argue they do not accept the social constructionist stance either:

'Interactionist research starts from a belief that people create and maintain meaningful worlds. To assume that realities beyond the interview context cannot be tapped into and explored is to grant narrative omnipotence.' (Miller & Glassner, 1997, p.102).

The author then recognises that interview participants actively construct the interview but takes the view that nevertheless analysing the text can still give us some useful information about their social worlds. After all, if talk gives us no access to someone's world then it is pointless.

The role of the analyst is also acknowledged here. In the same way that an interview is a construction of the participants, it is recognised that an analysis is a construction of the analyst and is inevitably influenced by their own assumptions and experience. This research then cannot establish 'the truth' about what is happening in interviews but it can establish 'a truth'. Whether this 'truth' constructed by the author resonated with the practitioners involved in the study is discussed below and the extent to which this was the case partly addresses the first of the aims outlined above.

Setting up the research

In considering which careers advisers to approach to be involved an early decision was made to use adult guidance interviews. It was felt that a greater range of issues would be likely to be raised by adults than by younger people and in a pilot study involving a small number of interviews the greater the variety in the data the better the chance of exploring a larger number of themes.

Careers Plus - Gyrffâu a Mwy, a North Wales careers company, was approached which had a well established adult guidance team and an initial meeting was arranged. The aims of the project were outlined and the team was asked whether or not they would be willing to participate by providing recordings of some of their interviews which could then be transcribed for analysis. Interviews would only be recorded with the client's permission and if the client or adviser changed their mind at any stage the tapes would be erased.

The sample

The team contained people who had varying amounts of experience and who had trained originally on different courses or via the NVQ route. The advisers were requested to select interviews with a variety of clients where they felt that the interview focused on guidance issues. More specific guidelines than this were felt to be inadvisable in an exploratory data led study where inevitably the significance of any particular criterion could not be known in advance. Recordings of interviews which turned out to be essentially requests for information or for help with the construction of CVs were not used.

Following the logic of qualitative research there was no need to aim for a representative or probability sample. The aim of this small-scale pilot study was to test a method of analysis and to see what it could produce which would be of interest. In the end ten tapes were provided by four different advisers and this article is based on the initial analysis of the first six of these to be submitted and transcribed. On average the interviews were between 50 minutes and one hour in length.

Analysis and results

The method of analysis which was initially chosen to interrogate the data was a version of thematic analysis outlined by Margot Ely (Ely *et al.*, 1997, p.206). This involves an attempt to categorise the data into manageable units of meaning. This could be a phrase, a sentence or sometimes a single word. Themes which connect these categories are then sought. In this approach, it is understood that themes do not reside in the data but emerge from the interaction between the data and the analyst.

The analysis can be pursued in a number of ways. Commonly with interview transcripts, themes are sought which connect more than one interview. The pattern of these themes is presented with supporting evidence by the analyst to represent the 'meaning' of the whole set of data represented by all the transcripts. In this case the author initially attempted just such an approach but almost straight away ran into difficulties. At an early stage it proved to be impossible to find connecting themes across the different interviews. Each attempt produced results that either contained too little data to be useful or so much data that the resulting theme was unhelpfully vague. At this point the effort to deal with all the transcripts simultaneously was abandoned. Instead, one transcript at a time was worked on in order to produce a condensed version or 'vignette' of the whole of that particular interaction. Such an approach to analysis is discussed further by Kvale (1996, p.193). Typically, these vignettes reduced 70 to 80 pages of transcript to about 3 or 4 pages. The aim was to express the essence of that interaction as understood by the analyst in such a way that it would contain enough information to enable a reader to follow the interview process. An excerpt from the start of one of these analyses is given below for illustrative purposes.

Initial analysis - tape one

This is a client (CL) who prior to taking a career break to start a family had had twelve years' work experience. She is in the process of planning her return to work and is trying to decide how best to do this and what sort of work to consider. Much of the interview is spent trying to tease out what she now expects from a job.

It is very important to this client that her future work will be enjoyable. She is enjoying her current attempts to learn about computers and wants to find a setting for this that fulfils some very definite criteria.

CL "I'd like to work on my own ... after hours in a bank. ... Then I don't have to think too much or deal with people ... I've done that for twelve years before ... I fancied a complete change. ... I miss the people. But it's all the hassle you get with it you know ... I've done it all and I've had enough of it ... I want a change ... I do miss the people ..."

These initial exchanges seem to be about what she is trying to avoid and what she also misses. There is some evidence of her ambivalent feelings towards her previous work setting:

CL "The pressures were high you know. It all came back to you ..."

And later:

CL "... because I'm over them people it was my responsibility to make sure they were right ... it was good fun, I enjoyed it ..."

The careers adviser continued to try and discern exactly what it was that she had liked and the client made a number of statements which revealed something of this.

NB. "... " indicates that the analyst has omitted part of this sentence in the process of selecting those units of meaning which best seem to represent the pattern emerging from the text.

Each vignette then consists of a mixture of description, evidence in the form of extracts of dialogue from both parties and interpretive statements from the analyst.

It is recognised that inevitably products such as this are the result of a subjective process. However, each vignette was produced after many readings and re-readings of each transcript and as stated above is not an attempt to present 'the truth' of the interaction but to arrive at a representation of 'a truth'. On completion, each result was read for clarity of meaning by colleagues who were not involved in either the research or the professional world of guidance. A sterner test, of course, was provided by the reactions of the advisers involved in the interviews as discussed further below.

Following the production of the first vignettes, the author began to explore the possibility of connections between these representations of six different interviews. In each case, a metaphor was sought in order to summarise the essence of that particular analysis and also an attempt was made to identify any issues that had not been addressed which were felt to be potentially important.

The results of this exercise are presented below.

Interview one - The careers adviser as *Magician*, i.e. being expected by the client to pull the ideal job out of the hat and trying to fulfil these expectations. The process issue not dealt with during the interview was thought to be that of *Client Confidence*.

Interview two - The careers adviser as *Excuse*, i.e. allowing the client to avoid commitment to a decision. The process issue not dealt with during the interview in this case then was *Decision Readiness*.

Interview three - The careers adviser as *Protector*, i.e. protecting the client from her own feelings and trying to shield her from conflict with her mother. The process issue which was thought not to be dealt with on this occasion was *Vocational Maturity*.

Interview four - The careers adviser as *Gatekeeper*, i.e. providing information after exploring its relevance for that client but not discussing that decision first. The process issue here was felt to be *Adviser Transparency/Negotiation*.

Interview five - The careers adviser as *Motivator*, i.e. taking on the responsibility for encouraging the client to sort themselves out and take some definite action. The process issue in this interview was felt to be a repeating pattern of initial *Client Compliance* followed shortly afterwards by *Client Resistance*.

Interview six - The careers adviser as *Fixer*, i.e. actively pushing for resolutions to client concerns at the expense of a full exploration of those concerns. The process issue here was a repeating pattern of *Client Reservations* followed shortly afterwards by *Adviser Reassurance*.

The author fully appreciates that this summary will have to be taken on trust given the nature and extent of the data but the interpretations offered above did resonate with the practitioners involved.

For the sake of further discussion let us assume that the reader is willing to work with these interpretations. What if anything can be learnt from these about the nature of guidance practice or about the efficacy of this method of analysis?

Discussion

There are a number of potentially significant points emerging from this analysis:

- From only six interviews there is evidence of a wide variation in the patterns of interaction and in the assumptions underpinning them. This is in contrast to the findings of a recent study on adult guidance carried out by the Guidance Council (NACCEG, 1999). This was based on the results of focus groups rather than actual practice and one of the conclusions arrived at was that guidance seekers could be categorised into only four types and that these would be looking for one of eight types of interview. In the interviews analysed there is evidence that those looking for help do not fall into neat categories and the interviews themselves demonstrate that you cannot easily separate for example job search guidance, personal development guidance and learning guidance (NACCEG, 1999, p.38-39). Indeed if there is such a great variety of issues in only six interviews it is very likely that the analysis of a greater number would throw up evidence of even more complexity.
- A common theme across all six interviews is that the advisers tend to focus on the content of the 'problems' and often fail to deal with the process issues identified above. Given that these advisers have considerable experience between them and have not all had the same training it would seem likely that this tendency is at least partly due to factors external to the interview itself. The pressure to agree definite outcomes to guidance encounters is likely to discourage practitioners from departing too much from the content issues raised as is the finite amount of time available. However, it could also be due to assumptions and beliefs held by both advisers and clients which may be operating out of their awareness, e.g. a client's belief that the ideal job is out there somewhere or an adviser's desire to find answers to everyone's problems. Anyone carrying out a familiar pattern of work over a period of time is bound to operate at least partly in this way. One of the benefits of this exercise is that it gives participants a chance to look at patterns of interaction and assumption that may have fallen into unawareness over time. By definition these will be difficult to take account of without the luxury of retrospective analysis. This type of analysis then can make it possible for an adviser to surface and examine their routine assumptions and thus develop their practice. Although only one team of advisers was involved in this study it seems very unlikely that their failure to deal with certain process issues in these interviews is unique to them. There is no reason to suspect that their practice is significantly different from that of any other team.
- The results of this initial analysis were fed back to the team involved in order to see whether the themes identified resonated with their own experience. A workshop was held where the vignettes and themes were shared and discussed. Staff who recognised their own work were asked not to reveal this to the other participants. This was so that the focus could be on the issues raised rather than on why a particular adviser had acted in a particular way. As the issues raised were general the author wanted to avoid putting people in a position where their first instinct would be to defend their actions. The result of the debate was interesting in that people who had not been involved in the

interview being discussed at any particular moment frequently recognised patterns and situations that applied to their own work. Overall, they felt that the exercise had enabled them to gain perspectives on their work which would not otherwise have been possible and the response to the feedback was very positive.

Conclusions

Tentative conclusions can be drawn from this small-scale study. Firstly, it would seem that there is evidence that an interpretive approach to understanding practice can produce meanings which have value to others not directly involved in the analysis.

Secondly, this type of approach is capable of illuminating practice without resorting automatically to theory. A wider application of it or related methods could provide some understanding of what is actually going on in guidance which would be a helpful start to developing the new approaches which may be necessary in a rapidly changing setting.

Thirdly, judging by the response of the participants such an approach could prove to be a very useful tool for professional development.

It is recognised that this is a very partial and limited attempt to begin to develop new ways of understanding practice. For example, the views of the clients have not been analysed in this project. Also considerations of time and money meant that it was very much led by the researcher rather than being a collaborative effort. However, the author would argue that it has at least provided enough evidence to justify exploring this type of approach in more depth.

Finally, it is acknowledged that none of this would have been possible without advisers brave enough to put their work on the line and the author is deeply indebted to them for their help and forbearance.

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