

0722

## Career guidance unbound: a case of strategic resistance?

Charlotte Chadderton, Helen Colley

*Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom*

### Background

After a series of restructurings in its institutional forms over the last 15 years, the career guidance profession in the 14-19 sector has most recently seen a radical change in the boundaries of its professional remit. In 2001, former careers services were disbanded and the profession was shifted in its entirety from a specialist infrastructural terrain into Connexions, a new, generic youth support service set up to respond to New Labour's social inclusion agenda. The rest of the Connexions workforce comprised practitioners drawn from youth work, social work and other professions, which all (unlike career guidance) continued to have independent services as their professional base.

A key aspect of this government initiative was the goal of creating a new profession of 'personal advisers' (PAs): practitioners who were supposed to develop long-term relationships with young people having 'complex needs', broker multiple services for them, and offer them holistic, intensive support for a broad range of personal, social and educational problems, with a focus on the most disadvantaged young people. All Connexions practitioners were required to designate themselves as PAs, irrespective of their specialist professional background. The PA's role was conceptualised in policy as opening up the boundaries of traditionally separate remits in order to allow more 'seamless' provision for young people in transition. However, it was argued that there was a serious lack of clarity in policy statements about the functions of the PA role (Watts, 1999), and also that the role appeared to entail an impossible fiction in its idealised intensity and breadth (Colley, 2001).

### Research Questions

A key research aim for the project reported in this paper was to understand continuity and change in the roles, identities and practices of careers advisers transferred into Connexions as PAs. In addition, the project aimed to understand the effects of radical disruption to the boundaries and terrain of an established community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and to the knowledge and learning of professionals within it.

In the light of the data generated, we interrogate other literature on professional identities and change, both within Connexions (Artaraz, 2006) and in other lifelong learning fields (e.g. Shain and Gleeson, 1999). This literature has tended to categorise practitioner stances according to ideal types ranging from compliance to resistance, with an implicit assumption that a 'middle road' of 'strategic compliance' (Lacey, 1971) is most appropriate.

Research questions addressed by this paper therefore include:

- what happens when a profession is disrupted, and its boundaries become significantly weakened and re-defined?
- how can we understand the emotional, ethical and educational implications for practitioners when a profession is re-positioned in this way?
- and how do professionals respond to such changes?

### Methods

The data drawn on in this paper is generated mainly through in-depth 'career history' interviews with 6 career guidance trained PAs in each of three Connexions services, and with 9 such PAs who had decided to quit Connexions because of professional disagreements with the role they were expected to play. The sample was stratified according to length of time since completing their career guidance qualification in order to include long-standing careers advisers, as well as those who had trained more recently, knowing they would be working in Connexions. The narrative interviews were analysed using narrative techniques of 'emplotment' (Polkinghorne, 1995), and the resultant accounts were then

scrutinised by the project team for patterns of response to the official demands and expectations of their role.

## **Frame**

The paper draws on the work of Seddon, Henriksson & Niemeyer (2009) on work, identity and the politics of working life. It contributes to the further development of that ongoing international project as a globalised ethnography of occupational boundary work in lifelong learning contexts, drawing in particular on labour process theory (Connell, 1985) to frame 'the politics of we' that can arise in supportive 'spaces of orientation' (Haug, 2009), an active engagement in processes of fabricating collectivities (Seddon et al, 2009).

In particular, we use here an analytical framework illuminating different aspects of labour process theory, by addressing three forms of often invisible labour which evoked strong responses from PAs:

- identity work and its role in learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991)
- emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Brook, 2006, 2009)
- and ethical labour (Cribb, 2008; Cribb et al, 2008)

All three invite us to consider structural as well as agentic positionings, and the extent to which identity, emotion and ethics are bounded by the preconstructed parameters of professional roles.

## **Research findings**

The project found that participants engaged in complex responses to the dissolution of their former professional boundaries. These ranged from resisting the 'PA' title consistently, and asserting their identity as the 'careers person'; to falsifying young people's signatures in order to meet targets; refusing to place young people in inappropriate destinations even though targets demanded this; and for some, open opposition to service managers about such issues, to the point where they left or lost their jobs. Responses also included acceptance by some of the unbounded PA role, which itself challenges the boundaries of other professions such as social work. In other instances, PAs felt the need to comply with practices with which they disagreed, in order to maintain funding for the service and 'live to fight another day'.

In investigating the shifting or dissolution of boundaries in 14-19 career guidance, it became evident from our data that we needed to pay attention to the complex and fluctuating nature of responses that it provoked. We argue that there is a need for academics to resist ascribing bounded and essentialising categories - such as 'compliers', 'resisters' and 'strategic compliers' - to practitioners managing contradictions and tensions in their work. In this case, we contend that the uniform opposition to policy targets, and the variety of responses by PAs (individual or collective), could innovatively be described as 'strategic resistance'. This not only conveys the strategic judgements which practitioners had to make daily, but also emphasises PAs' agency in bounded circumstances.