

**Anyone Can Do Guidance...**  
**Losing and finding professional identity in a complex chain of services.**

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**ABSTRACT**

The following quotation raises an issue fundamental to career guidance practitioners' professional the identity:

We need to be mindful that the concept of guidance doesn't get undermined, because one of the issues is everybody thinks they can do guidance. (Senior career guidance manager, England, 2001).

The complex multi-faceted environment within which career guidance is delivered requires practitioners to respond positively and operate 'professionally' to achieve visions created by social planners who may not share the same understanding of what constitutes guidance. In an age where everyone now lays claim to being a 'professional' (Fournier, 1999), guidance practitioners' professional identity is threatened, changed and subtly redesigned to accommodate new circumstances.

This paper examines influences on the formation of professional identity, and outlines research based in Aotearoa New Zealand. By drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, the location of the subject (i.e. the career guidance practitioner) in relation to these discourses becomes significant, and the concept of 'care of the self' relating to identity formation becomes important in understanding practitioners' own attitudes and feelings towards their work.

**INTRODUCTION.**

The environment within which career guidance now occurs is increasingly complex. It is delivered by growing and diverse range of people, many of whom are not represented in the career guidance literature. The perceived economic benefits of career guidance have stimulated interest by policy makers within nation States and the OECD, meaning the environment within which career guidance functions is created by economic policy, and the vested interests of policy makers cause even social agendas such as 'inclusion' to have economic participation at their heart. This neo-liberal agenda has, therefore, fostered unprecedented interest in the process of career guidance, but little regard is given in the literature to the effect this has on those who do the job. My preliminary research of the situation New Zealand and England in the early 2000s prompted my current research. I found that career guidance practitioners and their managers felt strongly that they were 'meddled with' by policy makers through overwhelming and frequently contradictory policy decisions that prescribed what was to be done, and to whom. They felt judged and found wanting by a system that ignored their knowledge, skills and expertise. They were undermined professionally in an economic environment where managers used untrained and less skilled practitioners because they were cheaper than the highly qualified 'professionals.'

The environment in which career guidance operates is also changing from predominantly an institutional to market based, and newcomers have established their place. A further outcome of my preliminary research revealed that practitioners and managers from the traditional State-funded agencies felt the professional identity career guidance was fading, their feelings summed up by the following quote:

We need to be mindful that the concept of guidance doesn't get undermined, because one of the issues is everybody thinks they can do guidance. (Senior career guidance manager, England, 2001).

If the perception is that ‘anyone can do guidance,’ do career guidance practitioners need to re-establish or even establish their position as ‘expert’? Does it matter? For me, this raised a fundamental issue that those in the profession believed their identity to be threatened by external influences that fail to understand the complexities and nuances of career guidance. Why was this? What was causing such doubt and eroding professional self-confidence? Some research has been undertaken that relates to the professionalisation of career guidance (e.g. Watts, 1998; Douglas: 2000 a, and b; 2002a, and b; 2004 and 2005; Douglas and Smith, 2002; Furbish and Ker, 2002 and Furbish, 2002, 2003, 2004). However, this focuses on a traditional approach to what constitutes ‘professional’ and not on identity. I saw a need to explore the nature of career guidance practitioners’ professional identity, how it was formed, what influences this formation and how it affects their work. The effect of such constant and frequently contradictory change on career guidance practitioners interested me because the focus had been on the outcomes of guidance, and the effects of such environmental turmoil on the practitioners is largely ignored. My research focuses on career guidance practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, but the findings may be of interest to others in the field.

In this paper, I shall assess briefly the regulatory influences on career guidance, then examine whether career guidance practitioners should be concerned about professionalisation. In order to examine professional identity, I shall focus on the work of Michel Foucault, and draw on two phases in his work – the genealogical phase that considers the emergence of practices of power, and the ethical phase which focused on ethics and care of the self.

## **WHAT REGULATES GUIDANCE?**

Preliminary research I undertook in the early 2000s revealed that career guidance managers and practitioners held deeply-felt frustrations:

In my personal opinion, [policy makers] clearly do not have any understanding of what guidance is about. (England, Manager 1).

I think there was a feeling of being judged against something we hadn’t agreed with, something that we felt was quite deeply flawed. (England, Manager 2).

I don’t know whether it’s right to say this, but people have had enough of change. There’s an awful lot of confusion about who is doing what with whom and where. (England, Practitioner).

I think government’s got to wake up and realise that it’s playing some silly games out there with us. ... It’s just ridiculous. There’s got to be some way of improving that. (New Zealand, Manager).

The feeling of powerlessness that accompanies such elocutions indicates the absence of a suitable environment in which professionalisation can be developed and professional ‘closure’ achieved.

Those who practice career guidance or counselling are client-centred specialists “engaged in a verbal profession in which words and symbols frequently become the content of the interactions they have with clients.” (Herr, 1997, p.81). Career guidance theory, therefore, locates it as a client-centred, helping occupation and it is believed to be so by many practitioners. Nevertheless, career guidance has also emerged as a political and economic function through which State support is given (or withdrawn) in relation to specific policy-driven activities.

From a Foucauldian position, discourses are a collection of ways of writing, speaking and acting (commentaries) that are regulatory. They influence “how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others.” (Hall, 2001, p.72). Therefore, the concept of discourse and the identification of dominant discourses are fundamental to understanding identity formation.

Three broad discourses emerge that require further analysis. Firstly career guidance has become an official commodity, an economic project of, for example, the OECD, European Union, World Bank, UNESCO and other bodies who have established economic discourses as the criteria for supporting development. Identified specifically in monetary terms by Killeen, White and Watts, (1992) the economic project is translated by the State as “are we getting best value from our population?” (Senior Manager in the Ministry of Education in New Zealand, 2001). It is in direct contrast to the underpinning theory of client-centred guidance and counselling models which promote individualistic help; moreover, the discourses of ‘best value’ and of thwarting ‘dole bludgers’ become endemic, disseminated systematically through policy documents and contracts and embedded via the news media. Therefore, two further discourses emerge that underpin the ‘trans-national project’ (Sultana, 2009 p. 2) of the OECD, World Bank and State involvement. These are: i) to get best value from the population whilst reducing benefit dependency, and ii) to transfer the responsibility of managing this from the State to the individual whilst retaining ultimate control.

Arguably, this control at a distance is achieved through the second regulatory commentary: the location of knowledge. Increasingly, the knowledge and practice of career guidance is located within the uncomfortable marriage between psychology and counselling, and is a highly individualistic practice. Where then, does the concept of ‘competence’ and ‘competency’ sit? This emphasises propositional, practical and procedural knowledge (Cedefop, 2009) asking what and how, but not critical knowledge which should be asking ‘why’ and challenging the hegemony of the dominant discourses. Many international organisations have vested interests in competency-based training, and the growth of the European Union has added fuel to this fire. As Sultana comments, the adoption of external policy solutions are frequently “motivated by an effort to circumvent criticism or resistance” (Sultana, 2009, p. 7) and the winners of the international career competency competition will have much to gain.

This coalescence of knowledge within competency discounts and marginalises the increasing body of both literature and practice within other domains such as management and human resource management, and alternative mechanisms for career guidance, for example the emerging phenomenon of personal career coaching. This recent development is less regulated and it seems to be ignored. The career coaches seem not to be incorporated into the career discussions relating to guidance practitioners or, interestingly, represented as a threat to nascent professionalisation. My research so far shows that coaches may work alongside career practitioners, and have a strong sense of identity and purpose.

Thirdly, and relatively new for career guidance practice in some parts of the world, is ‘supervision.’ This is well established in other occupations, for example, as early as 1969, Scott found that psychotherapeutic supervision methods were used to manipulate social workers to think and operate according to the hegemonic requirements of the organisation. Supervision in career guidance practice has been construed as ‘two faced’, on the one side, supportive and empowering, and on the other, aligned with managerial monitoring practices, (see Bimrose and Wilden, 1994; Feltham, 2002) which in turn are driven by neo-liberal economic discourses.

Within these regulatory commentaries the dissonance between ‘profession’ and ‘identity’ becomes clearer. The profession is weak (Watts, 1998) and the State benefits from this by controlling ‘at a distance’ because professional compliance is achieved through expertise and the appropriate behaviour of autonomous subjects (Fournier, op cit). This is central to the concept of ‘governmentality’ put forward by Foucault (1997) which, as Jackson and Carter (1998, p.51) explain “seeks to control deviance” through rule enforcement. Therefore, the problem is represented as a weak profession, undermined by the preponderance of inadequate qualifications (OECD, 2004) which is resolved by internationally recognised competencies that present career guidance as a mechanism which “reflects a liberal economic view that reconstructs the relationship between State and citizen in terms of a reduction of collective responsibility in favour of an increase in individual responsibility.” (Sultana, 2009, p. 3).

The professional identity of the practitioner remains hazy, even unimportant to the extent of subjugation. Clearly, being weakly professionalised in such a volatile environment means the practitioner, particularly those working within a State-funded environment, is not a professional who has agency over their work. Instead, they become part of the mechanism of control at a distance which is highly likely to cause dissonance with a self-identity of a skilled helper who focuses on the client and their needs. The research I am undertaking will be able to examine whether this is different for those working in private practice.

### **DO CAREER GUIDANCE PRACTITIONERS NEED TO BE PROFESSIONALS?**

Why is weak professionalisation considered to be problematic, particularly in an environment where everyone lays claim to being a professional (Fournier, 1999) as a glance through the yellow pages will reveal? Traditional definitions of what constitutes a 'profession' identify advantages that are achieved through control of qualifications, membership and the exclusion of outsiders for the sole benefit of the members. This is called 'closure' by Larson, (1977). Yet there is, for all professions, the increasing encroachment by external agencies through requirements for 'quality' and accountability driven by governments, which challenges professional 'closure.'

If being weakly professionalised is an implied criticism, the economic factors mentioned above undermine and challenge the development of professionalisation. When this is combined by the drive by neo-liberalism to create a market for career guidance, causing fragmentation and deregulation of delivery, the notion that 'anyone can do guidance' should come as no surprise. 'Anyone,' however, indicates that the change in who provides career guidance, brought about by the marketisation fundamental to neo-liberalism is a threat. Career guidance is no longer sole-agency State-funded activity, the State has contracts with many agencies for many reasons, and a private market in personalised career guidance has burgeoned as an internet search will show.

State-funded programmes expect practitioners to work with other 'professionals' in complex networks or chains of services that provide for clients' needs. Clearly, both professional standing and professional identity are essential to demonstrate the level of skill and expertise to all parties, the State, the client and the other agencies in the network. I have found opposing responses to this, dependent on whether the regulatory requirements are cost or quality assurance. For example, in England, I found Chief Executives undermining the need for professional staff, substituting those with lower skills and qualifications (who were paid less) in order to manage costs. Conversely, in New Zealand, being a professional member of the Career Development Association of New Zealand (CDANZ) is a requirement of contracts set by the State. This is an example of lack of 'closure' i.e. rather than the profession imposing these requirements, they are imposed by others.

Is career guidance focusing on being professional at a time when this is ceasing to be an important issue? For example Sommerlad (2007), in her study of entrants to the legal profession in England finds that the awe and deference with which professionals were once held has declined, challenged by an increased demand for accountability fuelled by customer charters and a move to personalised customer-focused practices. Increasingly, being a 'professional' becomes aligned with the predominant economic discourses of efficiency, effectiveness, competence, compliance and even competitiveness, as is seen in research on teaching (Jeffrey and Woods, 1996; Woods and Jeffrey, 2002; Chaharbaghi, 2007) clinical practice (Doolin, 2002) and librarianship (McMenemy, 2007). Each of these charts how traditional, autonomous forms of professional behaviour were challenged and painfully altered to align with economic discourses, and the research by Jeffrey and Woods and Woods and Jeffrey in particular brings into sharp focus the misery caused to primary school teachers by challenges to their professional identity.

This demonstrates how the concept of 'professional' has become an adjunct to the first regulatory commentary that I discussed earlier, and while advantages of achieving professional 'closure' remain, the way in which this is achieved seems to have changed from autonomy to compliance. Somewhere along the route, professional identity is changed and subtly redesigned to accommodate these new circumstances. It is time to reflect on what constitutes career guidance practitioners' 'professional

identity,' to examine how it is formed and managed, and to understand how practitioners feel about the changes.

## PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Identity is at the heart of who we are, and professional identity, when looked at from an organisation and management perspective is formed by the influences of the occupation: training, doing the job and tools of management. Goffman (1984), and Hochschild (1983) in particular, give detailed accounts of the extent to which workers must go to subjugate their own identity and adopt one prescribed by the employer. This identity work requires the employee to become adept at 'deep acting' and assume absolutely the work identity required of them, regardless of personal cost in the longer term.

My preliminary research found a sense of lost identity, eroded by imposed circumstances and a feeling of not being understood or acknowledged by a range of groups within chains of operational networks; the voice of career guidance was small and felt threatened. Hughes (1963) asks the much quoted question "What are the circumstances in which people in an occupation attempt to turn it into a profession and themselves into professional people?" (p.666) and this question remains at the heart of the project of professionalisation. He has identified that the actions the subject or group of subjects are prompted by circumstances. These circumstances are clearly located within the regulatory commentaries and the actions of the subjects are the reaction of guidance practitioners to them.

I am using the work of Michel Foucault to understand the formation of the career guidance practitioner's identity (the subject) in relation to the discourses within the regulatory commentaries identified previously. Professional identity is formed and modified by the dissonance between 'profession' and 'identity' and affected by the concept of 'governmentality' or control at a distance.

To elaborate further, identity is formed and adapted through what Foucault (1997) called 'technologies' or the forces of influence on us. Two in particular are relevant to the study of professional identity, firstly the technology of domination or power, which is evident in the economic discourses and regulatory commentaries that surround career guidance, and secondly, the technologies of the self. According to Foucault, the "technologies of the self, ... permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being." He calls what occurs when these two meet 'governmentality', and it is here that my research is focused.

Governmentality is the "encounter between the technologies of domination of others and those of self" (Foucault, 1997, p.225). Jackson and Carter (1998, p.51) observe that governmentality 'seeks to control deviance' through rule enforcement, and Fournier (op cit) identifies that professional compliance is achieved through expertise and the appropriate behaviour of autonomous subjects. This control of conduct, or the 'conduct of conduct' is constantly "monitored and reshaped" through surveillance mechanisms that are "designed in' to the flows of everyday existence" (Rose, 1999, p.234) and include self-surveillance, which, in organisational terms for example, may occur through self-appraisal, contract compliance, target achievement and through the increasingly common practice of supervision.

Using Foucault's concepts, an interesting nexus occurs at the point of contact between the technologies of power on the technologies of the self showing that professional identity is not *imposed* by external factors such as those contained within the requirements of professional bodies, State or Government, or discourses emanating from the other regulatory commentaries. Rather, being a professional requires not only a set of skills, but also an accepted way of behaving. This way will certainly be influenced by these regulatory commentaries, but then the technologies of the self get to work, internalising and adapting the self according to the regulatory requirements. In a Foucauldian sense, the individual will undertake a high level of self-work, self-problematism and self-reflection in order to achieve conduct acceptable to the profession (Hunter, 1996), thus 'control at a distance' occurs as the regulatory commentaries become part of the internal voice and self-scrutiny becomes more powerful than any externally imposed regulatory system. Therefore, Hughes' question may be

interpreted as placing the responsibility back on individuals to become 'professional people' through self-work, rather than collective strategies of achieving professional closure.

But what does this mean in practice? The research I am undertaking in Aotearoa New Zealand is focusing on the formation and development of career guidance practitioners' professional identity and the influence of the environment on this.

## **THE RESEARCH**

The research explores what occurs at this nexus and will examine the relationship between the technologies of the self and the technologies of power i.e. the relationship between self and job. It aims to understand how career guidance practitioners think about and describe their professional identity, and explore the significance of the employing organisation and the professional association its' formation. Furthermore, the research seeks to understand the effect of environmental change on professional identity and what forms of acceptance or resistance may have arisen as a consequence these changes.

Essentially, taking a post-structural focus, which means that I am looking outside the usual 'checklist' definitions of what constitutes a 'professional', I am seeking to understand what career guidance practitioners' professional identity is, how it is crafted and why it is so important. This means I am using a qualitative methodology, which understands that "social beings who create meaning and who constantly make sense of their worlds." (Davidson and Tolich, 1999, p.27).

The growth in interest about qualitative research is detailed by Mason (2002), who identifies that it "requires a highly active engagement from its practitioners" (p.4) that it should be systematic and rigorous, accountable, contextual, reflexive in that researchers "constantly take stock of their actions and role" (p.7), and it should be conducted as a moral practice. Whereas quantitative methods focus on large sample size and replicability, qualitative research focuses particularly on smaller groups and examines their experiences in depth. The findings are specific to that group.

What makes the location of this research so interesting is that New Zealand has a diverse market for career guidance. As well as State provision via the Crown Agent, there are providers in tertiary education, a range of agencies who provide Government funded guidance, as well as private practitioners, life and career coaches.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Markets in career guidance are firmly established, and career guidance is given in many diverse ways, by many diverse people. Within this growing and increasingly complex environment, circumstances for professionalisation are not clear, and this may be understood as the 'pull' of professionalisation. I am focusing on the latter part of Hughes' quote about what circumstances cause people to want to become professional. This is the 'push' from the people towards professionalisation and professional identity is inherent within this.

The construction of professional identity is affected by the regulatory commentaries I have identified; discursive formations occur through systematically disseminating and promoting the discourses, leading them to become generally accepted. One of these discourses is that professionalisation is weak and hard to achieve, but this assumes a coherence that does not exist within career guidance (or indeed is it counselling? Or advice? Or development? Or coaching?). It glosses over the increasing complexity of provision and ignores the diversity of literature and knowledge bases that guidance workers of all kinds draw on. There is the potential for several professions to emerge rather than one, but in order for any form of professionalisation to occur, the 'push' factors need to be strong enough, and the affect of external and internal influences on professional identity understood. I hope that my research will make a contribution to understanding the formation of career guidance practitioners' professional identity.

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