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# Age matters? An exploration of the similarities and differences in the values and beliefs of practitioners working with clients of different ages

**Barbara Bassot and Barbara Shottin**

## Introduction and overview

Since September 2010 the Careers Advice Service for adults has been in operation. In preparation for this, new work based qualifications (including the Level 6 Diploma in Career Guidance and Development) for adult guidance practitioners working in the sector were developed by Lifelong Learning UK and are now approved by the awarding body OCR. At the same time, qualifications at Level 5 were being considered for those working with young people. Subsequently the Careers Profession Task Force (DfE, 2010) recommended that all career guidance professionals should be appropriately qualified at Level 6, moving towards Level 7 within five years. To date there has been no suggestion of a single professional qualification, which might be needed in the light of the forthcoming all age career guidance service in England. This raises the question of whether or not practitioners who work with young people and those who work with adults see their work differently.

An in-depth qualitative study was carried out in order to explore some of the core values and beliefs that practitioners have regarding the purpose of guidance and whether or not these vary according to the age of the clients they are working with. In particular the views of practitioners who work with young people ('young people' practitioners), those who work with adults ('adult' practitioners) and those who work with a wide age range of clients ('all age' practitioners) were sought; in order to compare and contrast them to gain insights into their respective values and beliefs in relation to their work.

At this point it is important to be clear about the meaning of the terms 'values' and 'beliefs' in the context of this piece of research. When speaking to practitioners about their 'values' in relation to their work with

clients, this was defined as the relative merit, worth or importance of their work. 'Beliefs' were seen to be the conviction and confidence they had in their work. It is clear that the definitions of these terms overlap and complement one another.

## The research questions – does age matter?

In order to explore the views of the practitioners, the following research questions were devised.

- What is guidance? In particular, do practitioners' definitions of guidance vary depending on the age of the clients they are working with?
- What are the underpinning values and beliefs of guidance practitioners? Again, do these vary depending on the age of the clients they are working with?
- Would these change in any way if they worked with a different client group?

As the research was qualitative, these questions were revised during the process of data analysis.

## Methodology

Values and beliefs are individual phenomena that vary from one person to another. In the light of this, the methodological framework of the study was one of interpretivism with a focus on 'attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 2). A qualitative research method was employed in the form of semi structured interviews with five practitioners; two who work with young people, one who works with adults and two who work with clients of all ages. Appropriate interview questions were devised, which were open in nature, giving lots of scope for discussion. These were revised following a pilot interview. The interviews were recorded, watched by both researchers together and discussed, in order to identify themes in the data. It is important to emphasise at this point that this research is not intended to be generalisable to large numbers of practitioners, but it was done to gain insights into how the practitioners viewed their work and to give some pointers for possible further research.

## Literature

Published literature in this particular area is conspicuous by its absence. Much has been written about the values clients hold in relation to work (Patton, 2000; Loughlin and Barlin, 2001; Brown, 2002). In addition, the values of practitioners within the professional helping relationship are also well documented. Such work is written from the perspective of counselling (Corey, Schneider Corey and Callanan, 2007) who point us to some significant questions. Can counsellors keep their values outside their sessions (often referred to as therapeutic neutrality)? Is this possible or desirable? The writers point to the concept of reflexivity, which they describe as the counsellor being sufficiently self aware to seek not to allow their values to impinge on the client. Where this is not possible, they argue that practitioners need to be open with the client regarding their position. As Corey et al (2007) assert 'No therapy is value free. You have an ethical responsibility to be aware of how your beliefs, or lack thereof, affect your work and to make sure you do not unduly influence your clients.' (p91).

## Research findings

As a result of the data analysis, themes were identified, which pointed to key similarities and differences between the perspectives of the practitioners. These will now be explored.

## Core principles

The data showed a range of core values and beliefs held by all practitioners irrespective of the age group of their clients. When asked about their underpinning beliefs and values in relation to their work with clients, the responses were very similar. For example, one of the 'young people' practitioners said 'It's about wanting to make a positive difference, impartiality, being non-judgemental, not directive' whilst the 'adult' practitioner said 'It's about impartiality, confidentiality, being non-judgemental'. One of the 'all age' practitioners said 'Striving to be non directive, non judgemental, offering a beneficial service. I get a personal satisfaction from helping people, getting them away from the mundane'.

These responses showed the commitment of the practitioners to a range of core principles, which they genuinely felt underpinned their practice. In addition, comments such as 'make a positive difference' and 'getting them away from the mundane' demonstrated the value they placed on providing a service they felt was professional and adding value.

## Key differences

It was only when examining definitions of guidance that key differences between the views of the practitioners began to appear. Both 'young people' practitioners saw their role in relation to helping their clients work towards a positive future. One commented:

The purpose [of guidance] is to give them career management skills. To help them look at themselves, look at jobs and opportunities and see where they can be in the future.

...and the other said:

It's about self discovery [for the young person], not just giving them information. They have a future, different paths and routes to take, a whole future ahead of them. They are at a critical stage – the wrong choice can be very negative, the right choice positive. It motivates me!

Both practitioners were looking at guidance as an essential process at a crucial, positive and rather exciting point in the lives of their clients. They demonstrated the satisfaction it gave them to be involved as a professional at such a vital time for young people with their 'whole future ahead of them'. The practitioners felt that helping clients become aware of the range of opportunities available and assisting them with important decisions about their future was a very rewarding activity.

They seemed to see the guidance process as one of informed decision making, echoing what could be described as a traditional viewpoint. As Killeen (1996, p29) asserts 'a great deal of career theory concerns decision making, regarding this as the key behaviour.'

For both practitioners working with young people, guidance appeared to reflect the DOTS model (Law, 1981); helping their young clients gain greater self and opportunity awareness, enabling them to make decisions and move forward into a time of transition. There seemed to be reliance on a trait and factor approach, as promoted by Parsons (1909) and Holland (1985) and evidenced by the comments about crucial, one off interventions, together with the idea of 'right' and 'wrong' decisions.

There are clear contrasts when comparing these responses to those of the 'adult' practitioner. When discussing

the purpose of guidance, she stated it is 'to help someone who has lost direction due to events in their life'.

Her view regarding the purpose of guidance had clearly changed:

I originally thought guidance was all about decision making – now I realise for most people it's not like that. They need to be able to sit and think. They have to feel empowered. If not you can't get them to make a decision anyway. They need to feel they are being understood, just to have someone listening to them at a time of transition and stress. They want the confidence that [comes with knowing] they are having professional help that they can trust.

Like the 'young people' practitioners, the 'adult' practitioner also saw the guidance interaction as happening at a crucial point in the life of the clients, but did not see this as an exciting, forward looking time for clients, but rather a stressful, anxious time of transition. This could also be a time when clients have lost direction and are in need of support. This sometimes involved facilitating time and space to think, whilst being an impartial helper.

There was no suggestion of the use of the DOTS model (Law, 1981) or a trait and factor approach with adult clients and the whole concept of decision making as a key feature of guidance was openly challenged. Understanding the process of difficult transitions and how to help clients manage these (La Gro, 2005) appeared much more important to this practitioner than the established career theories of Parsons (1909), Holland, (1985) and Law (1981). This adult practitioner did, however, believe that the wide range of career and related theory underpinning her approach gave her clients the confidence to trust her and to work with her. In turn, this knowledge gave her the confidence to work with them.

When asked to define guidance, the responses from the 'all age' practitioners included:

Guidance is about informing people, enabling them to recognise their potential and their options and to look beyond the obvious and beyond their experience. It's very much about empowering them; about building their confidence, motivation and ambition.

and

To enable clients of all ages to gain the skills and knowledge to make decisions themselves. It's about an empowering thing. Not about telling someone. Not even about helping. I try not to say 'how can I help you?' because it implies I will have an answer and I don't always. [It's about] enabling people to become empowered.

To some extent these practitioners encompassed the approach of the 'young people' practitioners by talking about potential, options and decision making as part of the guidance process. However, the fact that an 'all age' practitioner felt that her role was to enable all clients to look beyond their current experience and the 'obvious', suggests something different from the long established trait and factor, matching approach. Both 'all age' practitioners also echoed the emphasis the 'adult' practitioner put on empowerment, building confidence and motivation, and preparing clients to make their own decisions when they were ready to do so.

Interestingly, despite encompassing both the contrasting approaches of the 'young people' and 'adult' practitioners, these 'all age' practitioners did not differentiate between their work with young people and their work with adults. They felt their approach to guidance responded to an individual need, rather than being based on the age of the client – some young people needed help with motivation or confidence building or

just needed time and support to think, whilst some adults needed help to look at their possible options and make decisions.

## Working with a different age group

All practitioners were asked how they thought guidance might be different when working with clients of different ages. In response to this, the 'young people' practitioners said 'Guidance structure and process will be the same' and 'Guidance theories will be similar – similar skills'. The 'adult' practitioner also pointed to similarities, saying 'The principles are the same – the theory is the same', and again the 'all age' practitioners stated that it was 'The same model and structure for all clients. Core topics discussed are similar' and 'Both have lots of insecurity and want to talk about what's worrying them but both have the confidence to come for help'.

Asking practitioners how they felt personally about working with clients of different ages revealed some interesting perceptions. The respondents working with young people commented:

Hopefully adults will have already developed [career management] skills through what they have done previously. They are more likely to just want information.

and

With adults it would be going into the unknown; I'm not sure how advice and guidance would work? There could be limited training options, lack of opportunities and the choices available may not match their interests ... I have concerns about the limited support I could give.

Both 'young people' practitioners seemed to find the idea of working with adults uncomfortable. Previously they had both explained that they saw guidance as a process where they helped young people look at themselves and at their opportunities and make choices from a relatively standard range of options available. The presumption from the first practitioner was that adults would already know how to do this 'matching' process for themselves so they would not need professional guidance, simply direction to appropriate sources of information. Conversely, the second respondent felt that guidance would be more involved and problematic with adults since they would have a wider range of different experiences, skills and requirements and their options would be much less clear and possibly quite limited. For these very different reasons, neither felt attracted to working with adults.

The 'adult' practitioner's thoughts about working with young people were also interesting. Her views were that:

Young people don't want to say or can't say as much as adults. Adults need to get things off their chest and then they can move forward... With adults a lot have lost confidence. With young people maybe they don't have confidence but they haven't lost it ----and that's different.

Her comment regarding the loss of confidence on the part of adult clients seemed to point to a clear difference in this work to that with young people, who she felt did not usually have the same support needs. She viewed working with young people as a less complex process, where she would not be using her support skills and, as such, it was not an attractive option.

It was clear that the 'young people' practitioners and the 'adult' practitioner viewed their roles quite differently

and, as a result, found it hard to see how 'guidance', as they presently perceived it, would apply to different age groups. The 'all age' practitioners unsurprisingly had a broader view of guidance, encompassing the approaches of the 'young people' and 'adult' practitioners. In addition, the 'all age' practitioners did not differentiate their approach to guidance based on the age of the client. When asked about the differences between young and older clients, these practitioners did not focus on the guidance approach at all, seeing no difference in relation to their ways of working. However, they did recognise specific characteristics linked to the age of clients, which make different demands on the skills of the practitioner, as described below.

In some ways these practitioners saw adults as harder to work with than young people. They commented that 'Young people are not as aware of the barriers as adults. Adults can have lots of barriers and can use these as excuses for not progressing' and 'Adults often unpick it all—work with young people is often more clear cut' and 'Adults are more intense about what they want. Young people go more with the flow'.

In other ways they considered young people to be harder to work with than adults because 'Adults will tell you everything. They have their values and wear them on their sleeves, but with young people it's not cool to do that – you need to build up a relationship for the young person to give you an opening' and 'Young people speak with the voices of others – mums, dads, teachers. It takes a while to get their own voice. Mostly adults speak for themselves'.

Despite these different challenges linked to the age of the client, these 'all age' practitioners saw the guidance process and purpose of guidance as the same for all.

## Conclusion

From this in-depth, small scale piece of research, the findings suggest that whilst practitioners working with different age groups may have the same core values, their beliefs about the purpose and approach to guidance may differ widely based on the age of their clients.

This study shows that the 'all age' practitioners saw the guidance process as the same for clients of all ages; the particular approach used with a client was determined on an individual basis rather than based on the age of the client. They seemed to incorporate all aspects of those approaches used by those working with only one age group. They also seemed to have a clearer understanding of the different demands that the varied age groups can place on the practitioner's skills, even though they saw the process as the same for all.

It seemed difficult for practitioners working with one age group to comprehend how guidance 'works' with a different age group. They appeared to find it difficult to understand how their particular beliefs in relation to guidance would transfer to working with other ages. In addition, their perceptions of the guidance needs of an age group they were not familiar with could be flawed due to lack of experience with that group. This suggests a very real training and continuing professional development need for practitioners who might be required to work with clients of a different age group in the future. It would be wrong to assume that all experienced practitioners would be confident to work with a variety of clients, if they have only worked with one particular age group in the past. In preparation for the National Careers Service, this research gives insights into potential training and development needs of practitioners in order to prepare them for their work in the new service.

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Dr Barbara Bassot is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Career and Personal Development at Canterbury Christ Church University. She is Programme Director for the MA in Career Guidance. Barbara's research interests are in social constructivist approaches to career learning and development (in particular the work of Vygotsky) and reflective practice.

Barbara Shottin has a wide range of experience in both the youth and adult guidance fields: as a manager of Careers/Connexions centres, a consultant in both the public and private sectors and a senior lecturer on the Masters Degree in Careers Guidance and other programmes at Canterbury Christ Church University.