

Anne Chant, 'Parental influences on career and life choices – when did you last see your father?', pp 65-72

Reid, H.L. (ed) *Vocation, Vocation, Vocation: placing meaning in the foreground of career decision-making*, Centre for Career & Personal Development, Occasional Paper: Canterbury Christ Church University.

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ISBN 978-1-899253-91-3

Parental influences on career and life choices – when did you last see your father¹?

Anne Chant

Introduction

The Rogerian (Rogers, 1961) client centred approach espoused by careers professionals over the decades has served the needs of young people and professionals well. However in this paper I would like to pose a question. In striving to focus on the young person themselves are we in danger of minimising the importance of the influence of parental and family influences; treating individuals as monads, self sufficient units capable of purely individualised choices and self-efficacy? If this is true does this approach meet their guidance needs? Or, if young people are in fact progressing through their education and career with an unbalanced view of their opportunities without being aware of it, is the current approach to career guidance and learning sufficiently challenging? In this article I will explore the nature and potential of parental influence with reference to theoretical models and auto/biographical research; suggesting possible ways forward.

Setting the scene

First however I would like to present three verbal props to explore the nature and complexities of parental and family influence.

The first is that truism that 'it takes a whole village to raise a child'. My interpretation of this is that the parenting and nurturing of a child is the responsibility of a wider circle than that of the parent/s and close family. By necessity such skills, knowledge, qualities and wisdom are needed that they cannot come from one, two or even six individuals. In a traditional or less industrialised society this spectrum of needs may be met by the extended family and 'village', but in our own Western, more fractured society many of these needs are met by the 'professional family'. This of course is in line with the multi-professional team approach to the delivery

¹ A reference to the 19th Century painting by Y.F. Yeames of the interrogation of a young boy during the English Civil War. The answer that the smart boy was purported to give was 'Last night in my dreams.'

of services to children and young people that the Every Child Matters framework put into all our practices (DfES, 2003). So while we accept that parents alone may not be able to meet all the needs of a young person, few would argue with the premise that parents and close family have the greatest influence upon their development and the choices that they make. Pierre Bourdieu (2001) presents the concept of the cultural capital of a young person coming primarily from their parents and family, but in the same way that others (educationalists in particular) add to intellectual capital it is surely possible to add to, supplement and develop the cultural capital of a young person as well. However we cannot build upon cultural capital if we if we do not first explore the current balance of that capital; in this case the current impact on aspiration, career choice and preference of parents and close family.

The second verbal prop is a quote from Hodding Carter (1970) that,

There are only two lasting things we can give our children.

One is roots and the other is wings.

This rather mixed metaphor is not only an aspiration for parents trying to do their best, but also helps us to look at possible causes for the problems faced by some young people. For example the young person who lacks the confidence to apply for a university that is too far from home, does not engage in higher education at all and thereby fails to achieve their potential, even if only in the short term. For them the roots go deep; so deep that their wings are not strong enough to gain any height. Another young person may have wings such that they move here and there, living with perhaps one parent and then another. They may 'sofa-surf' or move in with a boyfriend or girlfriend for a while and then move on. With poor roots they may not get the nourishment they need, a feeling of belonging and identity or, in adverse weather, be able to withstand storms and winds. This metaphor gives us an insight into the notion of resilience that is so important in an ever more complex society, culture and labour market. It is a huge topic and I do not have space here to do it justice, but career resilience (Fourie and van Vuuren, 1998), the 'process of self righting and growth' (Higgins 1994:1) is something that needs attention if young people are to be effectively and honestly prepared for their future careers.

Finally, I would like to consider the third verbal prop; the poem 'This be the verse' by Philip Larkin. Those who know this work will understand that it would not be appropriate to include the full text here. Suffice to say that it presents the concept of inherited problems, generation after generation. He draws our attention to the repetitious nature of parenting; how we mirror our own experiences, both good and not so good. This may be so for other aspects of our personality, beliefs, values and of course Bourdieuan 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 2001). A young person raised within a racist household or in one where the role of women is limited to what is considered acceptable, is unlikely to challenge those 'truths' until much later in life, when perhaps they have the opportunity or experience to question them. So might we inherit our career aspirations (Inkson, 2007), horizons for action (Hodkinson, 2008) and interests along with hair and eye colour and our father's chin? We see evidence of this all around us; there are families of teachers, entrepreneurs and of course well known theatrical and musical families. Is this about pragmatic issues of availability of opportunities, networks or limited experience of alternative possibilities? Or is it more complex than this? Further more are young people aware of these influences?

Parental influence

This issue may be even more pertinent now than ever before as the influence of and dependence upon parents is elongated. As property prices and the availability of mortgages appears to push the age of financial

independence ever upward, the age at which young people experience new cultures, expectations and possibilities may also be rising. Paul Redmond's (2008) humorous but insightful description of the 'curling parents and helicopter mums' might touch a nerve for some of us. It tells the tale of parents who are obsessed with the success of their offspring, and of young people who are not learning the lessons of independent living and responsibility until much later in life than perhaps 30 years ago. How well does this sit with the career profession's attempts to be client centred when the client may not have any experience of having that responsibility or freedom? The longer young people are financially dependent on their parents, the longer there is for influences to have an impact upon their opinions, ideas and aspirations. If we agree that parental influence is a real and significant force in the decisions that young people make, the next question might be, 'To what extent are young people aware of it and to what extent are parents also aware and perhaps intentional in their influence?' Batista (2009) has explored the nature of influence in respect of the intention of the influencer and the acceptance of the influenced.

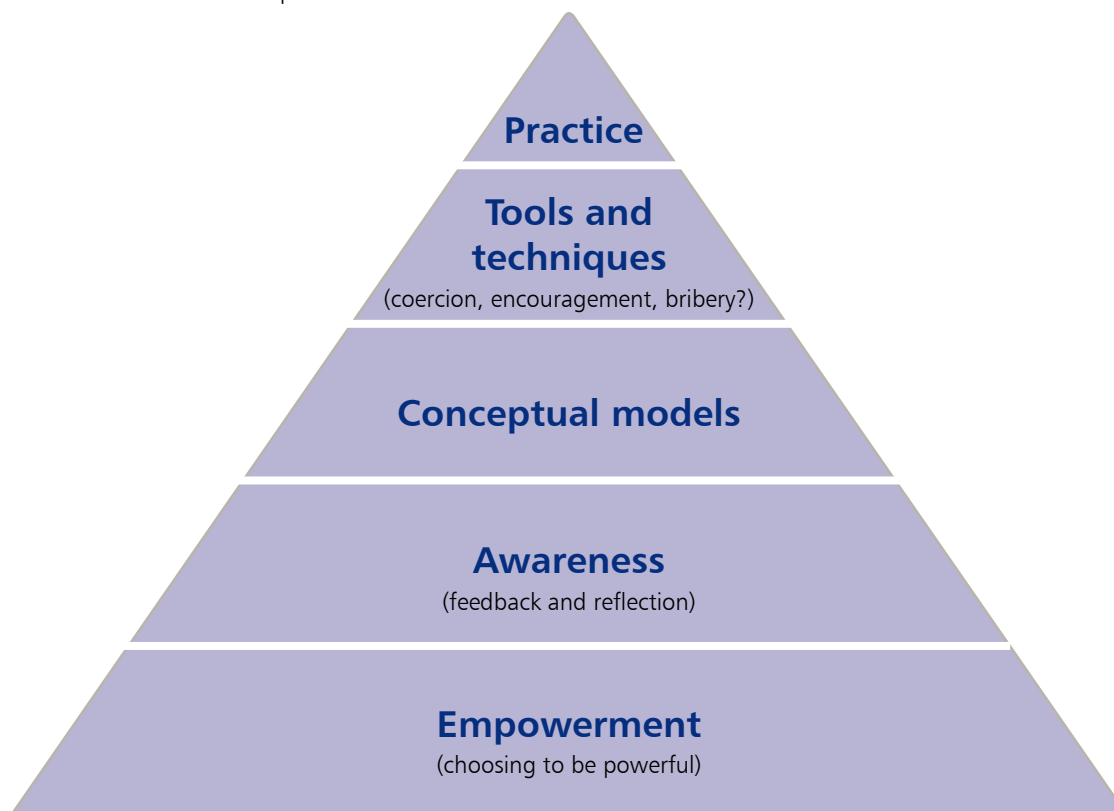


Figure 1. The Influence Pyramid (adapted from Batista, 2009)

In his Pyramid of Influence (Fig. 1) he proposes that in order to be influential the influencer 'chooses to be powerful'. That may not necessarily mean that in this context the parent makes a conscious choice to influence their child, although they may, but that they fail to check the power that they have over their child. This is then a question of awareness, both on the part of the parent and the young person. Batista has worked alongside the organisational behaviourist Prof. C. Robin (2010) to develop a narrative approach to therapy which helps to illuminate awareness of these potential influences. In this approach a great deal of attention is given to the choices that an individual makes in their lives and what shapes those choices.

While you may be wondering what the relevance of narrative therapy is outside a therapeutic context, the fact is that any kind of story-telling about our lives is an opportunity to see that story in a new light and thus reshape it... In my coaching practice, I often see clients recognize that how they describe an event shapes the choices they see (or don't see) in front of them.
(Robin, 2010)

The use of narrative can also illustrate the concept of the internalisation or externalisation of influence written about by Peterson et al (1985). They consider the notion of influences being so engrained into the person that it is no longer recognisable as having an external source. In other words, the individual presents the idea, belief or attitude as being their own. Alternatively they present the externalised influence where the individual is aware of the influence, but chooses to accept it or at least go along with it. Returning to Batista (2009) the influencer has chosen to be powerful and influence, and the influenced person has chosen to receive it. The influenced person knows that their 'horizon for action' (Hodkinson, 2008) is limited and so, one could argue, is in a better place to do something about it; find out information, question or reflect.

Might a narrative approach to guidance or coaching, as well as the use of narrative in a career learning context, offer us a tool to explore and illuminate parental influence? In my own research I conducted some loosely structured interviews with young people. I asked them to tell me their story from as early as they could remember, focussing on the changes in their lives and how decisions around those changes were made. One interview was with 16 year old 'Carol'. In Carol's interview two themes seemed to emerge. The first was the relative stability and lack of change in her life and the second her feelings about choosing subjects. Early in the conversation it became clear that the fact that Carol had lived in the same house all of her life, was significant for her. She states that, 'I've never been anywhere else...I guess it's getting more difficult for me to move...' The process of her decision making was discussed and she was clear that the decisions were hers and that she took advice and talked to people, but that in the end it was her decision. She shares some insight into why she thinks that this is the case when she explains that:

I think for my mum it was hard because she was sort of made to do things and she had to go and live in France when she didn't want to – so she's sort of always let me make my own decisions – that's probably why we've stayed in one house all my life!

Has Carol's mother, in response to her own past, maintained stability for her family and placed an emphasis on them making their own choices? It is clear that Carol believes that she is making choices for herself, '...no they were my choices – I just asked people for advice...' A little later we talk about the importance to her that she makes the right decisions and I comment that this is quite a big responsibility; and she agrees 'a burden in fact'. She is clearly uncomfortable making such decisions, illustrated by the regular acknowledgement of her worry about getting it wrong. This is a good example of what I believe to be internalised influence. Carol is firm about the owner of her decisions but acknowledges how hard that is on her because she has had so little experience of change.

In an interview with 'Thomas' another example of internalisation was illustrated. Thomas was a 14 year old who despite some clashes with his family and some behavioural issues, seemed fundamentally to want to become his father. Thomas makes it clear that his ultimate image of himself is that of a successful, responsible family man. He says that failing would mean 'like, not a good life' and that means 'a good job – a family'. Later he acknowledges that he thinks about 'now and...when I have a family...' At the end of the interview Thomas begins to talk about his concerns about the future. The language here is interesting and perhaps echoes his parents' words.

...what's happening in the economy – like they say that by the time you come out of university and pay your debts off you'll be 24...

...and the average food shop is about £100.

yeh – money aspects worry me and mum says that the price of petrol had gone up to £1.30 and that's ridiculous, and that's one reason I don't like the government 'cos I don't know how they expect **US** to pay for all of this.

In this last quotation it is notable that he is worried that 'they expect us.' He considers himself in the same situation as his parents and has taken on the responsibility (albeit metaphorically) and indeed the indignation of an adult.

However, influence did not appear to have been internalised in all of the interviews. 'Helen', a 16 year old, was aware of a number of influences and opportunities for support, including her teacher father. Early decisions appeared to be dominated by her mother, but later she comments on her observation of her father's role as a teacher, and the impact that has had on her own career options. She qualifies this by pointing out firmly that she would not want to be one; citing 'frustrations' and 'difficult children'. She also makes it clear that she would like to have a large family of her own and refers to her mother's experience of, 'hav[ing] to make sacrifices...it's like mum... she didn't have the career she might have had because she wanted to be a stay-at-home mum...'

The methodology for this small scale qualitative research was that of a constructivist approach. At the beginning of this article I referred to the concept of the monad; that concept of a person as an isolated, autonomous unit. However the socioconstructivist explanation of how people learn and 'know' suggests that this is not the case. Wlodkowski (1999:67) writing about the motivation to learn and these mis-assumptions of rationality and pragmatism, puts it well.

This state of affairs has been brought about by the complexity of human behaviour, the influence of socialisation processes on human endeavour and a growing realisation that claims for knowledge in the human domain are relative to the culture in which they are spawned.

The worlds in which the young people I interviewed were 'spawned' clearly influenced their ideas, beliefs and attitudes towards their futures. They were aware of some of this, but the process of telling me their stories enabled them to explore both internalised and externalised elements of that influence. Only then do they become more aware of the limitations of their own 'horizons for change' (Hodkinson, 2008) and, if they choose, be empowered to expand those horizons.

Practice

The narrative approach to career guidance developed by Savickas (2009) and explored in practice by Reid and West (2008), enables practitioners to recognise the issue of influence with a client. By helping the individual to recognise influences they are then in a position of deciding what, if anything, to do about it. However in the current climate in England, where individual careers guidance with a qualified, impartial professional may be under threat, it may be that it is the classroom that offers opportunities for exploring parental influence.

A simple way of highlighting the heredity of career and possible influences on a young person is by the use of the career family tree.

The fictional example of 'Jessica' in Fig. 2 could stimulate a number of discussions. There are some good examples of gender stereotypes in this tree, to what extent are they still an influence on Jessica? There are some key threads coming through the generations; how might these influence Jessica's choices? If Jessica's grandparents and even great grandparents were to give Jessica advice, what might it be? This could be given as an exercise for the whole class or, if there are no concerns about possible family sensitivities, by individuals drawing up their own trees with input from home. If appropriate the trees could be exchanged and questions posed such as 'if this was your tree, how do you think your ideas about your future might be different?'

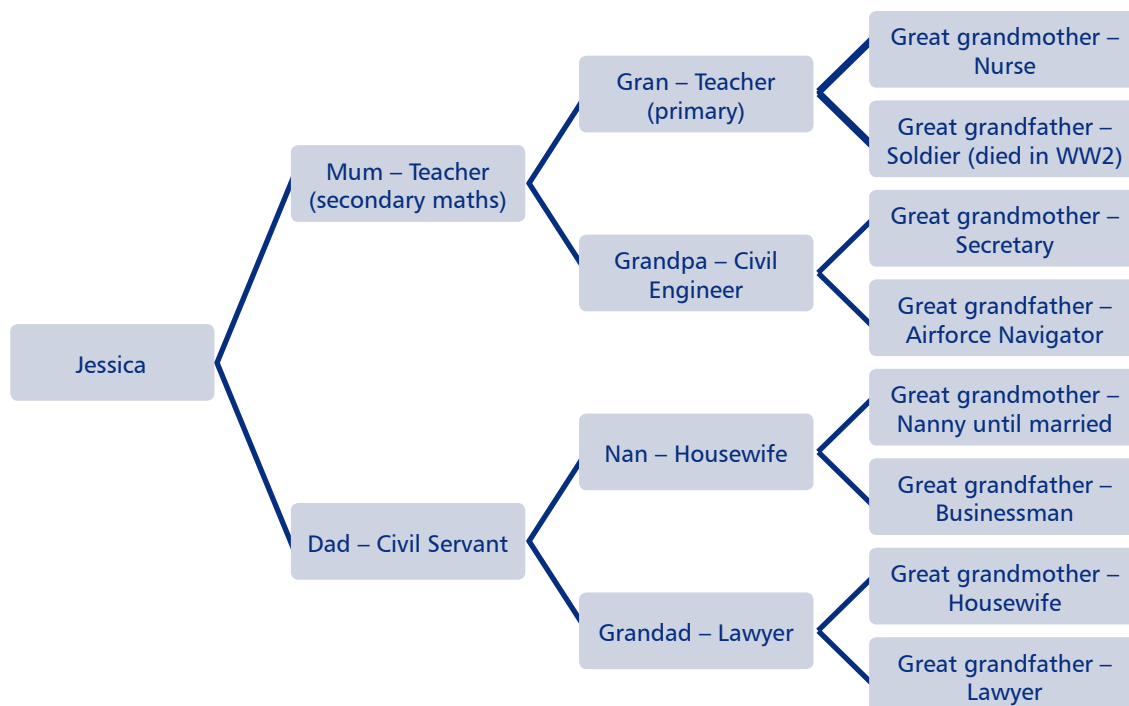


Figure 2. A Career Family Tree or Genogram

Chope (2006) concurs with this tool and extols the strengths of the career family tree or 'genogram'. He describes it as the 'best known tool for information gathering about family influence in career decision making'. He explains that this approach enables the counsellor to explore both genetic and cultural influences on decision making. But like all tools in this context, it is how it is used that is important. Much of this information is already known by the client, so it is the interrogation of the information that enables them to see possible patterns and influences. Chope lists a series of questions that, although based upon the basic information, may elicit understanding and reveal influences hitherto unrecognised and may highlight a narrowness of knowledge and opportunity. Questions include:

- what family patterns exist?
- which family member did you most admire?
- whose career aspirations are most similar to your own?
- what pressures do you feel when you compare yourself with your family?

The resulting raised awareness of possible parental and familial influence may be sufficient for the young person to externalise it, bring it out into the open to be interrogated (perhaps in a guidance session) and perhaps challenged.

Conclusions

In this article I have questioned whether the client-centred model is enough on its own to take into consideration and possibly challenge the powerful force behind parental influences on young people's educational and career choices. Perhaps there is an element of nervousness or naivety behind the reticence to engage with this thorny issue because as professionals we do not wish to be culturally or socially insensitive or offensive. However it may be that by at best paying lip service to parents' influence or at worst ignoring it, we are failing to meet the true needs of young people who will increasingly be dependent upon and influenced

by their close family. Of course we must take care not to make the mistake of assuming that parental influence is always a negative force, when in most cases parents influence, guide and encourage their children with their best interests at heart. But whether as practitioners we choose to address this issue or to ignore it, we might be well advised to at the very least recognise the presence of the parent or parents behind every young person in a one-to-one guidance setting, and also 'the crowd' present in the classroom. In acknowledging this influence as professionals we enable young people to do the same, so that if asked of a young person 'when did you last see your father' they could well say 'yesterday in my careers interview'.

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Joanna Oliver, 'Keeping your balance on a floating raft: engaging with voices in collaborative working between statutory and non-statutory sectors in services for children and young people', pp 72-78

Reid, H.L. (ed) *Vocation, Vocation, Vocation: placing meaning in the foreground of career decision-making*, Centre for Career & Personal Development, Occasional Paper: Canterbury Christ Church University.

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ISBN 978-1-899253-91-3

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Keeping your balance on a floating raft: engaging with voices in collaborative working between statutory and non- statutory sectors in services for children and young people

Joanna Oliver

Introduction

This chapter documents the initial findings from an auto/biographical study exploring collaborative working within service provision for children and young people. The study was initiated during a time when service provision was organised within New Labour's 'integrated children's services' (ICS) and when partnership and collaboration was valuable currency for practitioners and organisations within the ICS (Cleaver et al, 2008).

Since the commencement of the coalition government and associated austerity-induced efficiency savings, this study has perhaps become more relevant than ever, as an opportunity to convey the stories of practitioners working with children and young people in a context where uncertainty is an expected normality. As one research collaborator, Ronny, a manager of a training organisation for practitioners who work with children and young people, stated in his interview: 'It's a constant change. A constant trying to keep your balance on a floating raft.'

The intention of this chapter is to convey the voices of non-statutory sector workers, George, Lina, Ronny, Sian, Amber, Andrew and Louise and to illuminate some of the tensions that exist in the organisation of contemporary children's services. All research collaborators have agreed to their voices being represented, although pseudonyms are used to protect their full identity.