

Guidance in suits? Career coaching for everyone

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Abstract

This session will offer a personal reflection on the professional debate that can perhaps be crudely summarised as 'guidance vs coaching'. Advocating an expansive definition of career coaching, as laid out at a previous NICEC seminar, I will go on to consider the debate through the lens of the individual beneficiary of a coaching intervention. I will use ideas from the original 'Rethinking' text to consider the dangers of a conservatising tendency in coaching and map out what is needed for coaching to contribute to social change.

Introduction

This paper, draw on a reflexive consideration of the interplay between career coaching and social justice, based on my own background as a career guidance practitioner and my current role teaching on professional development programmes in career development and in coaching at the University of Warwick.

Is coaching just “guidance in suits”? What does this image mean to you?



Is coaching predominantly accessed by those experiencing corporate career 'success', or is it an emancipatory tool for social change?

When 'coaching' as a term began to be explored by those in the career guidance world, responses I observed ranged from curiosity, enthusiasm (and maybe from converts, evangelical zeal) cynicism and distaste. I can't source it, but I do know that I did hear the title of this paper lobbed as a dismissive accusation, it's just 'guidance in suits'.

Some of the problems associated with that image are perhaps then that coaching is only for people who wear suits for work, only for people with well paid jobs, only with organisational careers, perhaps even really intended people who are men.

Of course the accusation that coaching is guidance in suits, does rather imply we know what guidance is. At that time, guidance often discussed in terms that distinguished it from information, advice or career education. This is sometimes described as 'thin guidance' – the one to one end of a continuum with one to many activities at the other end.

Information Advice Guidance Counselling

I have argued previously (Frigerio, 2013) for a more expansive definition of guidance as 'thick guidance' – as reflected in OECD's listed activities of guidance:

- Informing
- Advising
- Counselling
- Assessing
- Enabling
- Advocating
- Feeding back
- Teaching
- Networking
- Systems change (OECD, 2004)

Many of these are done one to one, and the focus is on the individual, but others are not – advocating, networking (connecting) and systems change in particular. This presents guidance in context. Going even further, it is useful to look at the systems theory framework developed by Patton and McMahon (1999), a useful integrative development enabling us to hold components of career development together and model how they interact recursively in a therapeutic system.

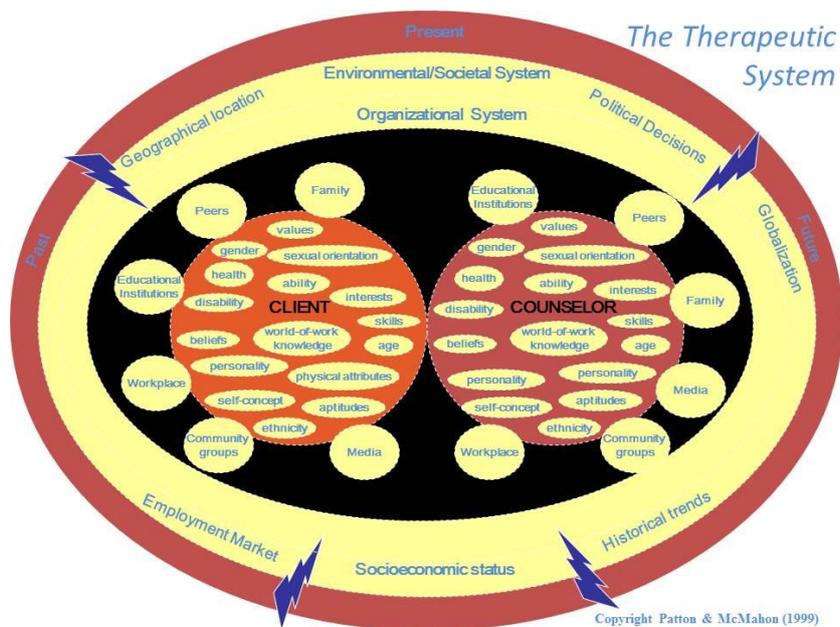


Fig 1: The Therapeutic System

Just ask Inkson noted that there has traditionally been little overlap between the different disciplinary traditions (psychology, sociology and organisation studies) contained within career development theory, or career studies (Inkson, Dries and Arnold, 2014), there is also little notable overlap between guidance and coaching.

I see them both as sitting within a wider frame of learning. I take learning to be the unifying construct between them and view the therapeutic system is a learning alliance. Previously, and in developing our MA, we've taken a similar approach to OECD in articulating 'activities of career coaching' – a form of coaching which is explicit about career development theories and how they inform career coaching:

- Includes a variety of activities
- Occurs in a variety of settings
- Has a learning focus
- Operates within opportunity systems
- Is trans-disciplinary
- Requires career literacy
- Creates a learning alliance
- Allows clients to make meaning

(Frigerio and McCash, 2013)

Career coaching as a political process

The reference to opportunity systems here brings me back to the suits reference. Watts (1996) demonstrated how guidance was a political process, operating “at the interface between individual and society, between self and opportunity, between aspiration and realism” (Watts, 1996: 352) , and

career coaching is too. Watt’s work articulated four distinct socio-political ideologies underpinning guidance:

	<i>Core focus on society</i>	<i>Core focus on individual</i>
<i>Change</i>	Radical (social change)	Progressive (individual change)
<i>Status Quo</i>	Conservative (social control)	Liberal (non directive)

Fig 2: Socio-political ideologies in guidance (Watts, 1992: 355)

In the career development world, this analysis contributed to a growing emphasis on the social dimensions of our work and particular its role in creating social justice (Hooley 2015: Irving, 2009). Nancy Arthur’s work (2013) has argued that this is largely conceptual in nature and Middtun (2014) has shown some of the challenges for practitioners in working with social justice concepts. More recently Buzdugan (2016) has shown two important factors in further working with this. Her research on unpaid graduate internships shows how even practices that can be seen as progressive in nature in focus on the individual (such as internship bursaries) can also be seen as conservatising as they allows unfair practices to ossify and normalise. She also demonstrates how for career guidance practitioners it is very very difficult to step into that advocacy role, it is seen as “not my place”. This demonstrates the importance of advocacy training, as well as focusing our attention on movement around Watts’s model.

Watts demonstrates how guidance provision has increased alongside increases in choice (although one could argue that in public sector provision in the UK at least this growth has not continued since 1992). However, coaching has proliferated in this time period, over a number of indicators – text books published, individuals defining their work as coaching, courses available – all indicators which demonstrate a growing market. I have been looking for evidence of the coaching world acknowledging and exploring its social impact.

Simon Western’s book develops a critical view of coaching and mentoring and draws attention to a second wave of coaching which is focusing on the micro, on skills and competence. He uses a fourfold critical lens to step back and one aspect of this is to explore emancipatory nature, finding forces for and against.

One very good example of that micro focus is Christian van Nieuwerburgh’s Introduction to coaching Skills. The book is organised in three sections:



Fig 3: Introduction to Coaching Skills (van Nieuwerburgh, 2014)

This text is positioned firmly in the progressive ideology, viewing coaching as a driver for individual change and channelling Rogerian principles.

I do see signs that coaching is becoming more accessible. For example, hardened distinctions between executive and life coaching are breaking down and coaching is now paying attention to systems in ways highly consistent with Patton and McMahon and the therapeutic alliance. Long's diamond model (2011) encourages practitioners to explore systemic influences on their coaching and John Whittington's systemic constellations providing ways to bring this into client work: *"Imagine all the systems in which your client has belonged: behind them, like a peacock's tail..."*.

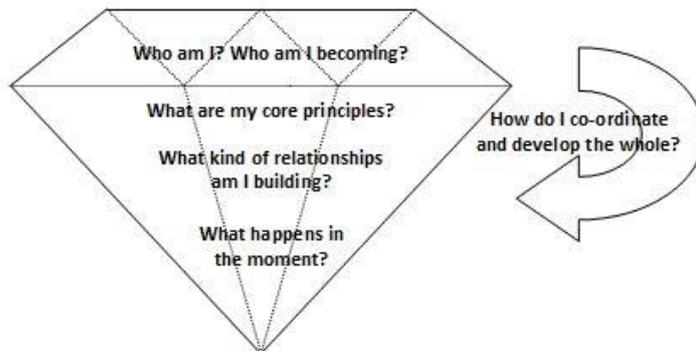


Fig 3: The diamond model (Long, 2011)

Initiatives such as 'Coaching inside and out' (working in prisoner rehabilitation) make coaching available to those for whom it has not been previously resourced. However, these often have the flavour of pro bono additions, and are focused at individual level. It is also demonstrable that people in executive roles are still envisaged as the beneficiaries of coaching through large chunks of the coaching literature (Owen, 2015)

Conclusion

My conclusion is that coaching recognises the system but is not yet making strides to challenge the system – teach advocacy. A contemporary focus is on running internal coaching networks in organisations and linking to organisational development through supervision groups. These can draw attention to systemic and ethical dimensions and raise consciousness about Watt's model, updated with a greater consideration of recursive movement around the four boxes.

The task ahead is to recognise and develop career coaching as an integrative practice which can facilitate movement between ideologies and support practitioners in advocacy and systems change. In the spirit of Paolo Freire (1970), by moving from static *humanistic* approaches to those with a *humanising* direction of travel, coaching too can be a tool for emancipation, and not just for the benefit of those in suits.

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