Helping
personal advisers
working with systems

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The **Career-learning NETWORK**

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based on :

Bill Law's

"System orientation: a dilemma for the role conceptualisation of 'counsellors' in schools"

"Counsellors and teachers"

"The concomitants of system orientation in secondary school counsellors"

and

"The contexts of system orientation in secondary school counselling".

Full references are given on page 3.

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This is part of a freely-available collection of material for career-work, education-for-citizenship and Connexions at

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introduction

'bumpy rides' for personal advisers

Programmes of networking help – like Connexions - acknowledge that what people do about their working lives is grounded in family and neighbourhood experience. They also recognise that those experiences are infused with feelings about other people, self and work – many of them painful, some of them damaging.

It all means that the effectiveness of programmes like Connexions depends on the role of a comprehending and responsive helper - a personal adviser - who has the time, and can make the space, for people to get a clear and usable view of what is going on in their lives. It restores a neglected emotional layering to careers work, and it acknowledges that careers do not develop in a social vacuum.

It also acknowledges the possibility of tension between the people involved. For example, personal advisers will listen to how people live their lives in the neighbourhood, in the family and in personal life. On occasion they will hear disclosures of allegiance and hostility. Sometimes the talk will touch on love life, on substance abuse, and on crime. The ride with learners can get bumpy.

The adviser is there to serve the interests of people who may be troubled – and troublesome to others. But the adviser is also working for an organisational management team - with targets to meet, stakeholder interests to respect, and a public image to defend. Advisers who wants to be open and responsive to a troubled learner, may not always be able to reconcile that commitment with what their managers say are their responsibilities. They could, then, be in for a bumpy ride with their bosses.

Advisers need to know where they stand on issues like these. And they need to know how constructively and professionally to manage the conflicts that may result.

how the idea of system orientation helps

This study shows how an adviser might respond to such pressures, and what the consequences of different sorts of response might be.

An adviser might, for example, be disposed to resolve matters by attending to issues as their managers define them. And they might do that even if it means diverting attention from learner concerns. This study shows how that same adviser will tend to assume that, where there is conflict between a learner's goals and those of his organisation, it must be the learner who gives way. Such advisers would be responsive to colleagues' expectations concerning their role. They might, for example, provide information about learners - even where confidentiality is compromised. Such an adviser would feel more comfortable working with the 'normal' majority of learners than with a deeply needy minority. Where any of this happens, deeper questions crop up about what being 'neutral' can possibly mean – deeper, that is, than worrying about whether careers information is 'unbiased'.

It is in such terms that this study builds up a picture of 'system orientation'. An adviser high on system orientation would only be comfortable with helping clients if the plan sticks to ideas thought to be 'okay' in the organisation.

System orientation, then, raises big issues, for those offering help to troubled people - challenging the very possibility of 'impartiality'. This enquiry examines attitudes among a single group, referred to as 'counsellors'. But, in today's world, its ideas pose pressing questions about whether - say - youth workers, social workers, voluntary workers, teachers and IAG people, share a similar orientation to any 'system' they occupy. Indeed, it raises questions about whether or not such a diversity of orientation might actually be helpful.

It implies that there may be some helpers in the Connexions network, whose orientation leads them to devote Connexions time to work that will not realise Connexions targets - and that this may be no bad thing.

what the enquiry probes

These issues are demanding and unavoidable. This study helps by:

- describing advisers who are 'high' and 'low' on such dispositions;
- showing how personal characteristics show up in them;
- identifying different kinds of conflict that can result;
- linking training to how people deal with the conflicts;
- suggesting what is required of a well-managed position in the organisation.

In all, it is an account of why we can't understand the adviser's work in a social vacuum, and how what advisers do is influenced by the institutional and social setting in which they work. But the study shows that different attitudes to this reality are possible. It also shows what these variations means in ethical, administrative and professional terms.

The account is of an enquiry first reported in The British Journal of Guidance and Counselling. That study was of education counsellors working in schools. The counsellors were working mostly with 14-19 year-olds on issues connected, not just with career and education options, but also with personal matters. The various ways in which they tried to manage these different focuses is reflected in their responses to the enquiry. At its heart is an issue about system orientation.

There are parallels with what those counsellors did then and what personal advisers do now. The terms in which the attitudes are expressed, and the consequences they have will, in some respects, have changed. But, if you can recognise that these issues are still issues in Connexions, and that people resolve them in different ways, then system orientation is a hardy perennial.

moving on from the original reports

Indeed, you may agree that the term 'personal adviser' could frequently have been substituted for the term 'counsellor' in this study. This has not, however, been done. The articles are intact - with no 'dubbing'. Dubbing always obscures the voice, texture and interesting imperfections of the original.

However, some adjustments have to be made to the terms in which the study is written; these are represented as footnotes on the appropriate page – which, I hope, work more like subtitling than dubbing.

The references for the original articles are:

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- 1977. "System orientation: a dilemma for the role conceptualisation of 'counsellors' in schools". British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, vol.5, no.2. pp. 129-148 (chapter one in this volume).
- 1978a. "Counsellors and teachers". British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, vol. 6, no.1. pp. 59-74 (chapter two).
- 1978b. "The concomitants of system orientation in secondary school counsellors". British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, vol. 6, no.2. pp. 161-174 (three).
- 1979. "The contexts of system orientation in secondary school counselling". British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, vol. 7, no.2. pp. 199-211 (four).

That was then, this is now. And, although the underlying structure and dynamics of what was reported are still recognisable, some details have changed. How this is so, and the implications of it all for practice, are set out and examined in the concluding chapter.

methodology

The methods are described in detail at each stage in the study.

But the basic rationale for the method is as follows. System orientation is investigated by means of a 30-item questionnaire completed by 398 practitioners. The questionnaire responses are interpreted by means of scales, by appropriate arithmetic manipulation and by factor analysis. This means that a lot of people are able to say a lot of things about their values, how their values correlate with other factors in their lives, what conflicts it all sets up for them, and how they want to resolve matters.

The items for the questionnaire were derived from my experience with clients, while working as a school counsellor. and - later - while working with trainee counsellors as a university tutor. In this respect there is an element of participant observation in the design and reporting of the study. Some of this case-study material was also published separately and is referenced in the articles.

Furthermore, all of the ideas have been subjected to scrutiny, based on an intensive trawling of the counselling literature and parallel ideas in the sociology of education.

This is, in these ways, a triangulated study – examined from vantage points offered by measurement, by direct observation, and by a literature survey – woven into observations with both external support and internal coherence.