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Hazel Reid ^a & Linden West ^b

^a Centre for Career & Personal Development, Canterbury Christ Church University, Southborough, UK

^b Research Directorate, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK

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Struggling for space: narrative methods and the crisis of professionalism in career guidance in England

Hazel Reid^{a*} and Linden West^b

^aCentre for Career & Personal Development, Canterbury Christ Church University, Southborough, UK; ^bResearch Directorate, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK

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We report in this article on the second phase of an in-depth project examining practitioners' use of a narrative model for 1-1 career guidance interviews in England, derived from the work of Mark Savickas. Using biographical narrative interviews, we explored the impact and constraints experienced by eight practitioner participants when engaging with a new model, and their struggles to learn, reflexively, from the experience. Further, in-depth interviews were conducted with four practitioners who 'risked' engaging with narrative methods to enhance practice, and achieved some success, but not without struggle and difficulty, professionally and personally. The narratives were analysed using protocols developed in previous research. The results illuminate the difficulties of creating space for experiment within a hard economic environment, dominated by outcomes and targets, as part of what can be seen as the 'technicising' of the guidance profession. Although drawing on all the interviews, we focus in this article on two participants' narratives which are particularly evocative of the need for creative space, in contexts where professionalism appears to have diminished. The research itself provided space to think and imagine career guidance in more holistic ways.

Keywords: career guidance; narrative approaches; professionalisation; qualitative methods; research

Introduction

This is a story of research into a project devised to experiment with narrative methods in career guidance, derived from the work of Mark Savickas (1997, 2005, 2009). The experiences of clients, in diverse contexts, was the subject of a first article (Reid & West, 2011) while this one focuses on the perceptions of guidance practitioners, working in different settings and different kinds of communities. Their stories have to be located within an understanding of developments in career guidance and its policy context, within England, which have been explored extensively elsewhere (Watts, 2010; Watts & McGowan, 2007). However, it is necessary to mention aspects of this, as part of making sense of the practitioner narratives. We then explain our study and its biographical narrative methodology, and the idea of transitional space, in professional practice as well as research. We focus especially on two case studies, which, in their luminosity, reveal everyday

*Corresponding author. Email: hazel.reid@canterbury.ac.uk

struggles to be creative and thoughtful, when arguably this has become more difficult. We also engage with some of the complexities of using biography and narrative, in the play of self, identity and practice, before concluding with reflections on how and why the project became so important to the guidance workers concerned.

A context: closing and opening space

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) career guidance policy review (OECD, 2004) recognised the focus placed on the destinations of young people who leave education and move in and out of marginal and unskilled employment, and unemployment. The UK Labour government, concerned about youth exclusion, launched the Connexions service in England (DfEE, 2000) in order to increase inclusion for those viewed as on the margins of mainstream society. The overarching aim was to increase 'employability skills', the absence of which was considered the biggest source of poverty in the UK. Connexions services subsumed the work of careers companies and careers advisers working with young people in the statutory sector (i.e. schools). No longer allowed to call themselves careers advisers, practitioners were either guidance personal advisers (working with young people to ensure they made informed decisions about education, training or work) or intensive personal advisers (working with young people who were experiencing a range of barriers to engaging in education, training and work). The organisation of youth support and career guidance in England changed again in 2005 (DfES, 2005) becoming integrated into local authority services supporting young people. Further changes have taken place since our project was completed, not least the severe budgetary restrictions imposed by the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government. In many areas, the extensive cuts to funding for Connexions and youth support services have significantly restricted the service offered, leading to redundancies and office closures in many areas across England.

During the time of our study, Connexions services were obliged to offer targeted guidance work to prevent 'at risk' young people becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Personal advisers worked (and continue to work) with other youth support agencies, similarly focused on policies of inclusion. This could be viewed as a desirable 'multidisciplinary' development, yet this may have weakened, rather than strengthened, a sense of professional identity. Whilst interdisciplinarity can be welcomed, where this leads to 'joined-up' services for young people, a weakening of professional identity for career guidance practitioners could be to the detriment of what happens on the ground (Watts, 2010); and it also may threaten the funding of career guidance provision.

Within Connexions services, guidance personal advisers work among colleagues who have a range of experience related to helping young people. Such colleagues have diverse qualifications or are 'in-training' for relevant qualifications. The qualification route for guidance and intensive personal advisers is confusing to an 'outsider'. Personal advisers may possess professional qualifications gained through a university (for example in youth work, social work, health care or career guidance) or they could be trained via a work-based route (a National Vocational Qualification – NVQ). The move to work-based qualifications in guidance created opportunities for a wider group of individuals to gain work experience and qualifications. But these qualifications are at varying academic and professional levels and have widely different intellectual expectations of the participant. In particular, an approach based

on ‘competencies’ that is not underpinned by developed theoretical understanding has led to a technicising of the guidance sector, or, in our terms, a narrowing of space for professionalism. What this means, in everyday experience, lies at the core of our two case studies: as does the importance of the learning engendered in the project for enhancing the experience of being a professional.

Powerful discourses at work

We argue that in a situation where guidance work has become more complex it appears that preparation for the work may have diminished, being restricted to a powerful and instrumental discourse in guidance in the UK, focused on ‘getting on with the job’ (Reid, 2007). From a managerial perspective this is pragmatic: personal advisers were needed, and quickly, to meet the government agenda. The funding for services is secured by meeting targets and prescribed service delivery. Criticism of the consequences of this ‘technicising’ of the guidance profession is reflected in a recent study evaluating the impact of the 14–19 reforms on the career guidance profession in England (Colley, Lewin, & Chadderton, 2010). Such criticism can be viewed as unhelpful for the future position of career guidance at a time of severe financial constraint. However, such *regimes of truths* (i.e. ‘do not draw attention to the difficulties as it weakens the profession further’) need to be questioned. Regimes of truth, or discourses that function as ‘true’ rather than ‘false’ (Foucault, 1980), define what can be said, and who can say it, as well as defining what cannot be said, as they ‘rule out other ways of thinking and acting’ (MacLure, 2003, p. 178).

Moreover, getting on with the job and avoiding criticisms of the profession does not lead to reflexive and knowledgeable practice (Edwards, 1997). Such discourses limit space for practitioners to engage in the development of theory and research. Indeed theory and research can be viewed as irrelevant set against pressing, day-to-day concerns. In order to survive, guidance services, alongside other agencies, under the gaze of government policy, must comply, meet targets and now cut back on anything other than ‘core work’ or front line services. This would seem like ‘common sense’ in hard times, but such unquestioned thinking ‘shuts down the problem’ (Britzman & Dippe, 2000, p. 32), and shuts out criticism. Resistance to these discourses can emerge, but on the edges. Our project provided space for some resistance, but time and other demands circumscribed the involvement of particular practitioners from the original group. The ‘other demands’ may be linked to the challenges that using a new approach brings, within a context where practitioners can find themselves in a kind of Faustian pact, wanting to be client-centred but having to meet NEET targets. The result may be to persuade young people into ‘opportunities’ that may not be wholly suitable. Alongside this, experienced careers advisers may be working with others who appear under-educated or under-prepared for the work – a paradox where the demands of the work have increased but professional training has, in many areas, diminished.

Of course, the processes in career guidance need to be located in a much broader context of a crisis of trust in professionals and their knowledge base and practice, among policy makers across the Anglo-Saxon world and more widely (Chan, Fisher, & Rubenson 2007; Furlong, 2000). The belief that professionals necessarily act with responsibility in relation to those they serve no longer holds, while the relative autonomy of the professions and their training has been under intense assault from government and its agencies for some time (Furlong, 2000, 2005). Governments have

chosen to intervene and shape professional educational programmes and practice as part of the ‘modernisation’ of human services, under the rhetoric of standards and accountability as well as a strong economic ‘efficiency’ agenda (Bradbury, Frost, Kilminster, & Zucas, 2009; Chan et al., 2007; West, 2001, 2009). This applies to relatively high-status professions like medicine as much as the ‘softer’, ‘lower-status’ areas of teaching, social work and guidance.

However, we should make clear that we are not hankering after an idealised, lost world of professionalism, grounded in what could be highly paternalist notions that professionals always know best (because of their high status, preferably scientific knowledge, as with doctors) (West, 2001, 2009). Rather, we want to explore the notion, as part of a debate about professionalism and its prerequisites, that guidance and career counselling (paralleling insights from other fields) requires the capacity to work empathically, reflexively and creatively with diverse clients, often in difficult circumstances (West, 2001). And this necessitates considerable self-knowledge and understanding of human interaction, including, we suggest, of the role and nature of narrative in processes of meaning making. Such an idea is a contribution to the more general debate about professionalism in a less deferential, multicultural, uncertain world, where traditional structures of authority and opportunity have often diminished.

A biographical narrative study

We have used biographical narrative methods to chronicle and illuminate the struggles of a group of guidance workers, operating in schools-based careers guidance and open access points in difficult and demanding marginalised communities. As indicated, they were engaged in an experimental project in the use of narrative methods in their work, building on Savickas’s narrative career counselling model. In brief, narrative career counselling is concerned with how individuals understand and develop career behaviour through the personal meanings that they bring to career decision making. Savickas (2009) states that when making choices about working lives, attention needs to be paid to biography, ‘private logic’ (p. 187) and life goals; not just occupational choice. Such an approach, it is suggested, needs to move beyond twentieth century ‘trait/factor’ matching and focus on personal meanings, within a cultural frame; one that considers context – past, present and future. The outcome is not factual truth but narrative truth; meaningful to the individual in terms of experience, understanding of the world and of future possibilities (West, 1996). Briefly, using narrative involves six initial exploratory questions around role models, favourite books and media, hobbies and interests, and discovering a motto or favourite saying than can sum up an approach to life. The exploration continues by visiting stories from childhood to search for significant patterns and themes. For further detail on this particular model of narrative career counselling, see Savickas (2005) or Reid and West (2011).

During 2008/9 diverse practitioners were invited by email, sent through a ‘local’ Connexions company, to join the project. The eight practitioners who expressed an interest attended three workshops during the academic year 2008/9. In these they practised the approach, and pilot interviews with clients were listened to and the discussion was recorded, transcribed and then shared with participants. Further client interviews took place and all transcriptions were given to clients, plus the practitioners recorded their own reflections on using the narrative career counselling

model. During the academic year 2009/10 we then interviewed each of the four practitioners who recorded their work with clients (the other four had withdrawn because of extensive work pressures). The practitioners were given an initial checklist of points to be covered and an ethical code was carefully explained, including the right to say no as well as to be consulted in the use of the material.

The practitioners sought to experiment with the narrative career counselling model, involving a number of clients. Particular sessions were recorded and analysed, which was the basis of a first article (Reid & West, 2011). The focus here is on biographical narrative interviews with the practitioners themselves, chronicling their experiences in depth, and locating these in the context of wider experience. We were concerned in the research – mirroring the project – to create a good enough space for storytelling, by focusing on the quality of the interaction in the research setting. The work was more relational than ‘scientific’ (Merrill & West, 2009), inspired by feminist researchers, acknowledging that the researcher’s presence shapes the process, like it or not. Attention is given to the emotional dimensions of the work, which include unconscious processes. This, alongside the workings of power, can be seen as an integral part of any encounter. Interviewees, for instance, may give researchers the answers they, the researchers, might want to hear, born out of anxiety and/or a need to impress (see West, 1996). There is, as Hollway and Jefferson (2000) have noted, a defended as well as a social subject to consider. We emphasise, in response, the importance of relationship and building more open, honest and exploratory forms of storytelling, embodying the richness or ‘thickness’ of experience. Emphasis is given to taking time with practitioners mirroring the aspirations of narrative guidance itself. And to attentiveness and deeper forms of listening; drawing on our experience, in Hazel’s case, of career counselling, and in Linden’s, as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist (Merrill & West, 2009; Reid & West, 2011). At every stage, our collaborators were encouraged to reflect on the process and the extent to which they felt able to express themselves freely with us, in the interviews as well as the workshops.

In order to analyse the case studies, a pro forma was employed to identify themes but also to interrogate the quality of the process, including any transference or counter-transference (another way of describing this is the auto/biographical dynamics); the effect, in other words, of the narrator on the interviewer as well as vice versa. Both can be a source of insight into the meanings and emotions being communicated (Merrill & West, 2009). There is a thorough immersion in recordings and transcripts, by each researcher separately, who then completes a pro forma, and these are then compared and contrasted. The pro forma will include standard biographical data, emerging themes, reference to relevant literatures, but also reflection on process issues. Attention is paid to any potential *gestalt* or overall form in the material, which can help in making sense of particular elements. We worked in this way with the transcripts of all participants and there were similarities with regard to themes across the four ‘cases’, but we decided to *re-present* the stories of two, John and Zoe (all names are pseudonyms), in more depth. Their stories were particularly rich and illuminating, constituting what can be termed ‘telling’ case studies, in the language of ethnography, ones that reveal common themes across all the material in especially acute and/or complex ways (West, 1996). We were respectful of all the stories told but these two in particular – tellingly – reveal some of the subjective, messy and anxiety-ridden struggles in cultures which can easily constrain experiment. We were interested too in establishing the whole story or *gestalt* of

particular people. Shorter snippets, across all the case studies, would have been more fragmented, less illuminating in their richness and narrative power (Richardson, 1997). In addition, John and Zoe used the narrative career counselling model in very contrasting geographical, social and economic situations, including an area of economic dislocation and major social problems. We should add that the narratives as presented in this article have been read by John and Zoe and approved by them. We worked, in short, to minimise anxiety at every stage.

Reference has been made to the idea of transitional space (Winnicott, 1971), when thinking of the experiences of guidance practitioners but also of research. Transitional space offered a sensitising concept in considering these narratives of professional practice. Winnicott had originally been concerned with what facilitated healthy psychological separation from a prime caregiver, in early experience, and movement towards greater individuation and psychological integration. He regarded the capacity for play and creativity to lie at the core of positive human development. 'Good enough' early relationships provided templates for more fulsome, less anxiety-ridden, and playful engagement with experience; for feeling contained and legitimate, as well as valued in the eyes of significant others, especially at times of transition. These processes came to be seen as fundamental to development across a life. No initial or subsequent context is perfect, in terms of relationship, and we may easily slip, when times are difficult and we feel exposed, into excessive concern for what others think, and even into fear as to how they might respond, rooted in the basic vulnerability we all share. A need to appease or please can take over, and a psychological split may develop, in which, for instance, playfulness in professional life – with its imaginative and symbolic possibilities – loses some affective investment and consequent satisfaction. Mind and body get split, with shakier feelings of self a potential consequence. These processes may find expression in working contexts, when space is colonised by others and their concerns and there is perpetual anxiety over a role and its meaning.

Two narratives of struggle

Space for resistance: restlessness and the risks of narrative

John provides careers guidance in a number of schools, in a relatively affluent part of the region. He has had a diverse career, but there is a theme of restlessness in his narrative, of wanting something more. Narrative approaches intrigued him, but the actual experience of using the approach raised questions. Asking people to tell their story was both liberating and scary. There was a fear about what might be revealed. Young people were trying to make decisions at significant transition points and he was raising questions about the possible reaction of 'middle class' parents if he got this wrong. But it was energising and enabled people to 'get back to basics' and think about what they wanted to do, why and for whom.

Beyond the project, the opportunity for John to disseminate the work led to the reflection that narrative approaches cannot be for everyone in a hard-pressed service. In John's transcript, however, there is a sense of someone prepared to take risks within a sufficiently contained environment. This partly had to do with the project itself, but also the school where he prepared the ground for a first interview with a client by getting the teacher on his side. John has seen many changes within career guidance and is part of them, including the move to work-based qualifications in the

sector (NVQs, for which he is an assessor). In the face of change he also retains something he believes to be at the heart of the work: developmental experiences for himself and colleagues as well as clients. He viewed the work as initially scary but deeply satisfying, particularly where his 'usual model' (based on Egan, 2007) proved unhelpful.

John's first client had already made a choice which appeared to fit with his academic profile, but then seemed less committed. As the son of a teacher in the school, this was a convenient referral, but, thought John, might prove difficult if not successful. A second client was confused but talkative and enjoyed the stories and responding to the Savickas six favourite questions (2009). Using the approach with another client led to tears and a 'worrying weekend' for John as well as the client.

The project: a safe space to take risk in a time of professional uncertainty

A strong theme in all the practitioner biographical narratives was of the project providing a safe space where anxieties about doing something new could be contained. In addition, practitioners commented on the rarity of having the time, of 'being allowed' to reflect critically on guidance work. However, beyond the project meetings, such safety did not extend into the work space for three out of the seven Connexions advisers. They did not produce recordings of interviews or respond to our later invitation to reflect, biographically, on the project. These advisers cited pressure of work or changes in work role, in a context of professional uncertainty. John commented:

So yeah some of the changes are really good . . . we've had this *great* uncertainty about what's happening to the profession, whether we're going 'all singing all dancing' sex, drugs and rock and roll, as well as careers – that was the intention of the late '90s, I understand, but it didn't happen. We're very much in two camps, guidance and intensive . . . it's affected the very nature of the work we do. Connexions are totally different to the careers service and it took a long time to get used to.

Change is constant. In such a climate the appeal of story, of paying proper attention to the client and their interests, gets lost in pressurised practice where moving the client on and meeting short-term targets 'rules the day'. John said:

. . . letting the client tell their story this is something . . . this triggered something, because when you're assessing an interview you realise as a careers adviser you have *no idea* who this young person is after being with them for 30 minutes, they [the adviser] had not 'allowed' that young person to tell their story.

Experimenting together

John experimented with a client in a school where he is established as the careers adviser. In the feedback at the end of the interview the client said, 'it felt like we were experimenting with this together'. Even though 'out of his comfort zone' at the start, John liked the sense that he was working alongside the client rather than 'doing it to the client'. He was prepared to take the risk and live with the uncertainty of not really knowing how the client would respond to the questions and being asked to tell stories from earlier in his life. He was worried, though, that the client might reveal things 'that his mum, working you know in the school, might not want me to hear'. But it worked for the client.

... he was a sixth former and he'd applied for architecture and got an offer doing 'A' Levels in maths, physics and art... and his mum was tearing her hair out because he really didn't seem to want to do it anymore... she said, he's not really motivated, he's a bit laid back. I explained the approach... and I spoke to his mother as well... He was doing all the right 'A' Levels, he said he wanted to do architecture, I couldn't really quite get a grip on what was wrong with it you see, but in a three stage model it would have been a match as it were... The profound bit for me came when I said 'Well what is your motto, that you'd have on your t-shirt or what is your badge?' He said, 'Oh, it's relax', and I said 'Do you want to live in a house that's designed by an architect whose motto is relax?!' We laughed and after a while he said 'No of course not' – this was the moment, the road to Damascus moment, and suddenly this profound light came into his life... 'I like maths, I'm good at maths', so he is now doing a degree in maths and I think he's in America for part of the course and it's all much more "relaxed".

Living with uncertainty

John was able to live with the uncertainty that the approach may not work and needed framing. Despite feelings of 'trepidation' before the first interview, he sounds confident on the recordings, relaxed and willing to 'see what comes out of it'. For John the motto proved powerful in more than one interview,

... the motto the 'wild child', when she said that and then retracted it, I made her relax, 'But you can have wild child if you want to'. At the end of it, she got the stories, she got the headlines and I said 'I wonder what all this means?' and she went back to 'I really don't know', and I think I said, 'Well shall I say what I see here... someone who is outdoors all the time, in the environment, "wild"... and it began to dawn on her, it really was a path that, you know, that she could maybe use in her life and develop. She began to think about these options... And her feedback was fascinating... I said, 'What are your thoughts on this?' and she said it had revealed something, so it was much more personalised... she said 'and it all came from me' whilst pointing to her heart or soul.

Painful stories need to be heard

Despite the enthusiasm that John expressed for narrative methods, and his ability to contain uncertainty, he found them most helpful when his 'usual' model was not working. He reflected on why 'the standard Egan approach' may not work, perhaps when there were deeper issues that needed to be worked through. He remained concerned that any adviser using the approach could be 'treading on deep family issues' and he worried about the boundary issues of wandering into counselling rather than career guidance. He found it 'nerve wracking' when working with a tearful client, but concluded that 'we have to take regard of these stories'. With a tearful client, attentive listening, containing the story and providing a safe, reflective space for material to be told 'out loud' proved difficult for John but enlightening for the client. The interview had to end and did not reach a neat conclusion, leaving John uncertain about the method. Reflecting on the client's stories – and on his own worrying weekend before seeing her again on the Monday – he said that she'd had the time to reflect over the weekend:

... it came to a point I think with this client of, do you want this relationship with your sister to continue, do you want to have her snapping at your heels all the time, in her words, doing something better than her, even though she was the brightest girl in the year, she said something about she wanted to be first best not second best! Then she came to see me on the Monday morning and her countenance had lifted, she was bright

and I said 'How are you?' 'Oh I'm great,' she said. 'I've chosen my "A" Levels, biology [no chemistry, medicine had gone] languages, Latin, history.'

John, the particular and the general

As a reflection on the eclectic use of approaches in the UK, John thought the approach provided 'another tool in the box'. This might be counter to the view that considers narrative as a different philosophic approach in counselling, which should eschew such eclecticism (McLeod, 1997). However, for guidance practitioners it could be regarded as a pragmatic response in a time-constrained and 'integrated' approach to theory. John used the approach with discrimination in an overtaxed system. 'We would never get through the case loads that we're allocated if we did a narrative interview for everybody' and 'For somebody who's pretty clued up, committed, but just confused about the education system, they don't need a narrative interview'.

In all the practitioners' transcripts there is sensitivity about professional status – the dilemma of wanting to be client-centred and impartial in a context of targets, outcomes and managerialism – alongside struggles, pain even, at the loss of professional status. But John is 'going to show them' and looks for opportunities to 'fight back', to resist and do something different. All the practitioners in the project wanted to claim more space for creativity, but it was far from easy and they needed support to build the confidence to try something different. John commented, 'My story has moved on because of the project'. He was able to take risks and live with the possibility that trying something different may not prove successful. For him, using a narrative approach has reinvigorated his career and reminded him of core values; of what he wants from his job and to achieve in working with clients.

A closure of space: narratives and their disturbance

Zoe works in a different, marginalised urban space. She is a guidance worker who feels passionately about what she does and the need to experiment in her work. But at times there is the strong sense of inhabiting a professional world discouraging experiment, or serious thinking about clients or the role of the guidance professional. There is also a pervasive pressure to deliver outcomes as the gaze of policy trumpets a demand for clear and measurable outcomes. There is a threat to services in this contemporary economic environment and guidance workers, Zoe stated, are anxious for their jobs. Space is limited, she contends, for experiments in narrative methods. Clients have to be processed efficiently into work and/or training if contracts are to be maintained. The context in which Zoe's Connexions Access Point (CAP) operates is highly relevant, being an area that has suffered from processes of de-industrialisation, with fragile employment prospects, high levels of unemployment and poverty. The collective story of the area can be one of constraint, depression even, which can, in turn, infuse individual client stories (Thomas, 2002).

Using a narrative approach evoked ambivalence in Zoe – exciting, stimulating yet also troubling and uncertain. The clients she worked with represented mixed experience. One, a young man, enjoyed the chance to talk and make connections, which included events at primary school and the influence of parents. Another, a young woman, raised difficult issues around boundaries between explicitly therapeutic processes and guidance work. Stories of violence in the home quickly emerged

in response to Savickas's questions and the client did not return for the second follow-up session. Zoe felt inadequate and needed to talk about this, yet operated in a world, she said, where supervision was sporadic or only conducted in groups. If ticking boxes and following a 12-point interview protocol (with a clear focus on ensuring particular kinds of outcome) might close down space for the 'other' (and maybe the guidance worker), opening a different quality of space could be scary, raising the questions about the training, role and expertise of the worker.

Closing space

Zoe talked at some length of her wider discontents with professional practice and in her work as an assessor, observing 'the NVQ approach':

I became very aware... of exactly how many questions were being asked of young people, and it seemed to me as though however much the intention was for it to be a shared process, by the very fact that the questions were being asked of somebody... the balance of power rests with the person asking the questions and if you ask them lots of questions – I used to start counting them... We say that this is the place to explore your ideas, but how genuine is that when you are taking control of that setting... So that, I suppose, is almost... an ethical basis as to why I felt that the research project was something I would want to be involved in.

She had been a youth worker, which had been 'rewarding' and yet represented, culturally, a different space to guidance and she worried that young people might 'come away from [guidance] feeling as though they have been done to'. Zoe insisted that 'for anybody working with young people [the priority] is to build a relationship with that young person, and so that's why I chose that because that's my passion, I suppose, within the job, and it seemed to me that a narrative way of working with a young person seemed very natural'. However, the experience of applying a narrative method was highly complex.

Trying things out

Zoe felt that letting go of checklists was difficult. She talked of the sense of being 'exposed in doing something that you're not comfortable with or confident with'. Moreover, the offices were noisy: 'You can hear the person talking in the other interview room, especially if it's a man with a deep voice, so I have to be so careful'. She had to ask people not to use that room: 'So all these areas of preparation which you wouldn't normally need to be thinking about, and then I was worrying about the tape recorder...'. A first interview was 'fine', notwithstanding. The client seemed to enjoy talking and his (and Zoe's) anxiety levels dropped. He was, Zoe sensed, opening up to the idea of talking to somebody and was quite happy to be revealing aspects of his life, including the difficulties of talking to his parents. Zoe was trying to manage her own anxiety and said, at the end of the process, 'I'm not sure about this'. The client replied, 'Oh, no, no, it was great'.

In the client's later feedback, he described how he had gone to meet an old friend because of talking about primary school in the first interview. Looking back at the past and making plans in that light had been, Zoe said, 'very powerful, which gave me confidence to carry on with it'. However, another interview did not work quite so

well. There was a story about a deeply disturbed young woman who talked about difficult matters:

...one particular story she was telling me about when she had a knife put to her throat... and... in the actual interview I listened to her and she told me her story and I think what happened, the more I listened the more she told me her story... and then it became very difficult for me to think, well what do I do now?... She was very, very matter of fact in telling me these stories, so, and this will always be a problem for anybody who works with young people who tell them stories like this, what do you do?

It felt to Zoe like a bombardment of distressing events communicated in an emotionally disassociated way. How to react to the material, and the presentation, was problematic. The client did not return or go to an appointment with a counsellor that had been arranged as a way forward – ‘so in those circumstances you are always left with that feeling of did I do the right thing?’ And there was, as noted, an absence of adequate supervision – other than provided by the process of the research itself – to manage some of the feelings engendered.

Resistance and its meanings

Zoe attempted to introduce narrative methods more widely in her role as a lead adviser in the CAP. She used the simple device of ‘tell me a story’ with other staff, in her training role. She asked them to talk about an interest or passion as a way of mirroring good practice with clients. She talked of huge resistance among some, and accusations of being overly intrusive:

... [it] would be for everybody to come along with something interesting and talk about a hobby, or an interest or a passion, something outside of work... There were lots of people, so you’d only be talking for three or four minutes each and it was called ‘show and tell’... my reason for suggesting it in fact was because I felt it fitted in quite well with the whole idea of narrative, also it just gives an opportunity for you to see people as people rather than with their work hat on... and then a number of people complained and said that it was intrusive to talk about themselves at a work event and I sent an email out saying ‘but we expect young people to talk to us about themselves all the time’.

Private life and work should be kept separate, some had insisted, with a possible implication of work being overly intrusive in its gaze. Yet for Zoe, the tick box mentality evoked strong and opposite reactions in her. She wanted to do something different. Her dream was to spend more time in academe and to have the opportunity to talk about meaningful things in more ‘liberal ways’. The project represented a resource of hope, if troubling too. She longed for a world of serious engagement with important issues and the chance to operate more creatively and professionally.

Professionalism and its discontents

Zoe talked about professionalism at length, of the difficulty of ‘not feeling, in yourself, that you have a professional status’. She talked about professional legitimacy and the sense of ‘not being on solid ground as far as what you are doing with that young person’. For her, the basic difficulty had to do in part with an

absence of professionalism and a learning culture. Working cultures, and what shaped them, discouraged creatively engaging with essential issues:

The one sensation I do have is there aren't many people within the organisation that you can have those sorts of discussions with. It just wouldn't be something that would be possible, we don't share a language even, anymore...

This in a context where, she felt, what was done to clients 'doesn't enable young people to have possibly more than the minimum, but also it restricts the individuals working within the organisation to try and achieve something beyond that...'. Zoe had completed an MA in Career Guidance which, she said, 'gave me an opportunity to exercise my mind'. The project served a similar purpose in what felt, at times, like a dispiriting professional world.

Zoe strives to be creative. She hankers after space where meaningful practice can be developed and discussed – ultimately for the benefit of the young person. However, she is far from sanguine that Connexions will find room for such qualities, or that many practitioners even view them as desirable. Nevertheless, what is heartening, despite these anxieties, is that the engagement with the project was seen as so beneficial and aspects of the method potentially transformative. 'Tell me the story behind that' is, she said, 'a very powerful way of getting people to start talking in a manner that's not "I'm answering your questions"... they are setting the agenda then for themselves'. Using the approach helps 'people relax more' – perhaps more significant than at first appears – because it has to do with the struggle to build trust, rapport, and the feeling of being listened to and valued.

Conclusion: complex spaces and the diminution of professionalism

There are questions that may be asked about how representative professionals like John and Zoe are; indeed, about the generalisability of our entire project. Our research, in the final resort, is based on a small, opportunistic sample of people, operating in a particular part of England, in specific contexts. We were not working with large random samples of clients and practitioners to allow more conventional, statistically based claims to be inferred. Except, in our case, such thinking would have been considered undesirable, because of the importance of working with practitioners prepared to take risks, and to give extensively of their time, for the purposes of the study. And we sought to generate, in our method, a luminosity towards lived experiences often absent from conventional research and large data sets. The verisimilitude of accounts like those above is, we suggest, convincing in its evocation of practitioner struggles, and of the potential for greater creativity with clients, and of some of the constraints of the contemporary working environment. In fact, in the material, we hear echoes from other studies of guidance practitioners and of experiences of diverse professionals who can also feel constrained, de-motivated and de-skilled by the march of technicism (Bradbury et al., 2009; Furlong, 2005; West, 2001). At the micro-level, in the everyday experiences chronicled above – of risk taking, giving of self, of anxiety and uncertainty but also of potential – we glimpse the complex selfhood of being a professional in worlds that may deeply constrain possibilities to be, and become, the professionals we would like to.

The qualities that narrative methods may encourage in clients – of finding more meaning and hope and a capacity for play, of ideas and possibilities – could be

considered essential for the development of a whole profession. John Hayes, the UK Skills Minister, said, 'I want to re-professionalise the careers service and create an environment in which careers guidance is recognised for the important public good it is, in which people, adults, schools, colleges, universities and whole communities see its value, use it and invest in it' (Institute of Career Guidance, 2010). We take such desire seriously, but its implications are considerable. Against targets and outcomes, we would need to place narrativity; against behaviourism, meaning; against 'efficiency', more slow time; against notions of rational choice, the importance of the emotions; against distance from clients and their concerns, greater biographical understanding and empathy; and against instrumentalism, the importance of creativity and play. There is, in this, a potentially radical antidote to current trends, a source of greater meaningfulness and even professional renewal. Yet the emphasis on narrativity and biographicity can be troubling too, and resisted, if good enough transitional space is largely absent.

Notes on contributors

Dr Hazel Reid is Reader in Career Guidance and Counselling and Director of the Centre for Career and Personal Development. She lectures and writes in the areas of career and guidance theory, supervision and research methods. She supervises Doctoral students who are using biographical methods. Working with other universities, she is engaged in an ERASMUS project developing innovative methods for career guidance practice. Her current research is exploring the development of constructivist approaches.

Professor Linden West is Director of Research Development in the Faculty of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University. He has written on change and transitional processes in formal and informal learning contexts. His books include *Beyond fragments: Adults, motivation and higher education*; *Doctors on the edge, a study of General Practitioners – Their work and learning*; and, with Barbara Merrill, *Using biographical methods in social research*. Linden is also a psychoanalytic psychotherapist.

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