

what's the use of impartiality?

careers work's claim to impartiality will probably not succeed - and it may not matter

6 November 2013

Chris Target's piece in the Career Development Institute (CDI) magazine, entitled [Meaning and Purpose](#), is both disturbing and useful. It examines two broadly distinguishable ways of focusing careers work. What might be called a 'client-centred' focus reflects the way a student or client talks about what's going on. While an 'expertise-informed' focus is on the information and diagnosis that a helper brings to that conversation. There's no necessary contradiction here. But the author wonders how much of it can be impartial.

We hear a lot about careers-work impartiality for employability. Politicians declare it. Employers welcome it. Expert careers workers claim it. And the CDI stands up for it. But there are issues...

- **1: what is impartiality?**

Accounts of impartiality have a lot say about why it's important, who can do it, how it's incorporated into practice, who speaks up for it, and what it does for equal opportunities. A great example of all this is [Fast Tomato - statutory guidance on impartial careers work](#). Maybe you can tell me where I can find the sentence that tells me how I would know when somebody is being impartial. So far, I've found one - and it's tomato-free.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police tells me that impartiality is acting...

'without fear, without favour and without affection'

It's a demanding impartiality - RCMP people are not to worry about their reputations. They get on with what needs doing, however disturbing that might be to the influential. And whether or not a person's face fits, it's evidence - not looking-good - that counts. It's a big ask, even for a tomato.

My source is Rohan O'Grady's gripping fable [Let's Kill Uncle](#). The hero tries to deal with troublesome youngsters, drawing on the RCMP impartiality by which he lives and breathes. But he is a loving soul, trapped in an obsessive habit. So he eventually ditches a shed-load of impartial righteousness, to make room for moral goodness. There's a difference - I'll come to it later. But Rohan O'Grady is better on impartiality than anything I've so-far found in the careers-work literature. Maybe you've found more?

- **2: can an economics-based service be impartial?**

'Impartiality' is a claim used by careers work to strengthen its hold on professional status and survival. There is a narrative of impartiality-for-employability-in-a-competitive-economy. That branching into the economy is cultivated - a widely-favoured funding ploy claims economic pay-offs. It's a possibility vigorously canvassed by careers work's true believers. But the evidence is not good - the findings of enquiries into [The Economic Value of Career Guidance](#) come to modest conclusions.

More basically, the claims of economics to scientific status must now deal with its own failures. Those claims are less impressive than meteorology's. Economics is little more predictive than astrology. It has spectacularly demonstrated its inability to agree anything about anything important. A study of [Economists and the Powerful](#) characterises it as 'convenient theories, distorted facts & ample rewards'. Is it possible that politically influential economist are grinding their own self-interested axes?

Some of this partiality features in what careers work calls 'labour-market information' - job descriptions, geographic distributions, rewards offered, demands made, trends plotted, people matched. There's much easy talk about how transformative all of this can be; and there is a transformation, less facile and a lot less comfortable. Because labour markets also feature worker exploitation, health-and-safety risks, manipulative underemployment, a failure to fund training, damage to neighbourhoods, economies weighed down by toxic assets, and invaded environments that we need to bring life to us all. Much of that narrative is set out as [Work After Globalisation](#). Do students and clients need to examine such realities? Are there economists who prefer them not to notice?

'Work After Globalisation' is a trade-union perspective. It shows that careers work concerns can have at least as much in common with worker representation as with human-resources management. Would that argue for fewer joint conferences with the business world, and more with worker representation? It would relocate careers-work use of economics to where it can be impartial. And it's not impartial now.

- **3: can a psychology-based service be impartial?**

People need links to labour markets, and careers work finds them in psychology. In more than a century of research-and-development careers work has linked labour markets to 'abilities', capable of 'potential', displaying 'interests', voicing 'preferences', engaging 'learning styles', framing 'constructs', managing 'chaos', and to much more. Talk of linking a person to a labour-market goes down well with commerce, and makes sense to the most transient of politicians. It may look impartial to them.

But they would be wrong. If a test of impartiality is taking account of all the evidence, then a largely psychology-based careers work fails. Because any complete account of links to labour markets would also mean working with 'what kind of people would I be with?', wondering 'would I like them, and would they like me?', and - maybe - worrying 'who would look after my child'. That person has probably seen neighbourhoods damaged, watched friends and colleagues humiliated, and seen news of global exploitation. Some want work that protects Africa, and not all work does. Some care about threatened species, and think of unfettered growth as destroying the planet we all inhabit. No impartial careers worker can assume that people will deny such social concerns in the name of individual ambition.

Work life cannot be transacted in a social vacuum - it is done with, for, and in response to other people. Work seekers inhabit a social space, sharing experience with people they know - and learn to trust. Those responses and that trust are first found in a locality. Those encounters are part of what has been called [Post-coded Careers \[BL78\]](#). Whether cosmopolitan, suburban, gentrified, rural or rundown, it's where alliances are negotiated and allegiances are forged.

I'm not saying that psychology is not necessary, but working only with psychological individualism is not sufficient. And there are wider social connections to a world undergoing change. In what has been called Liquid **Modernity** people take on board new ways of finding things out and doing something about them. It shows how politics, commerce and the media reduce a social world to overblown individualism. To acquiesce is not to be impartial.

Careers work is not alone in permitting individualism to neglect what we know about social influences. There is a broadly-based call for an acknowledgement of [The Public Value of the Social Sciences](#). Only a self-obsessed and self-promoting careerist would believe it possible to separate a career from the lives of others. But clinging to a sense of a free-standing psychology allows some to neglect the people on whom they most depend.

For everybody else a psychologically-driven careers work is not only failing to find any big-enough answers, it's not asking big-enough questions. Those questions would seek out what sociology, cultural theory and narrative-thinking can voice. It may or may not remain impartial. But, if there are any of Rowan O'Grady's heroes out there in careers-work-land, they are resisting the containment of limited thinking - for themselves and for their students. That's impartial.

- **4: as good as it gets?**

Acting without fear, favour or affection can mean calling on evidence that disturbs familiar assumptions. It might mean acting against your own interests. Rowan O'Grady's hero does all that. He sees it as professionalism.

At its best professionalism is a willingness to speak truth to power, to blow whistles, to prevent bossiness from displacing hard-won understanding. Working people, all over, put themselves at risk by doing that. A weakened politics might, for example, try to undermine educators who oppose it - the attempt is a clue to politicians' own secret anxieties.

Above all this, independent professionals resist arbitrary control. How they do it is set out in [Professionalism in Turbulent Times](#) - it speaks of 'changes, challenges and opportunities'. It's acting without fear, favour or affection. It defines professionalism as being independent enough, when it's called for, to say 'no' to your boss.

It gets better. The likes of Rowan O'Grady's hero find impartiality too limiting. In the end he stands for the rights of the people he is there to serve. And that's not impartiality, it's commitment. Not the same thing.

Words are important. And the 'im-' in 'im-partiality' is a negation - not taking sides, not serving interests, not accepting blame. It's a self-protective and 'not-me-gov' philosophy - seeking to be pure and free of bias. I don't see many clients and students clamouring for helpers like that. Do you?

While impartiality is a claim on who gets support, independence is a commitment to what needs doing - it knows whose side it's on, what interests it serves, the risks it must accept. It is a 'where-I-stand' philosophy. And careers work needs a basis for proclaiming that commitment.

Philosophy is also important - it speaks of [What's the Right Thing to Do?](#) It poses questions: 'who gets careers work's commitment..., ...the aspirational? ...people ready to work with an élite? ...used to consulting an expert? ...comfortable with abstractions? ...asking for more contact?'. Or is careers-work commitment not about seeking success, looking good, with people easy to favour, and congenial to work with. Commitment is to this organisation's students and clients, because that humanity has a right to this help - not 'worker' or 'shirker', but person. Whatever policy demands, commerce favours or bosses expect, independent careers workers know for themselves what they are here for. That's better than impartial.

But it's a necks-out posture. It's easier to claim the virtue, than to take the flack. How many do? The CDI needs to know. We all need to hear more of that good news about independent careers-work professionalism. Are you in a position to tell us?

- **5: institutionalised for what?**

If it were possible for governments to prescribe education, then it would have happened by now - governments have had enough practice trying. So why pick on education? I wonder if, in an out-of-control globality, weakened governments try to show electorates that they're in charge of something? And education look like an easy mark.

It isn't. Organisations need to be institutionalised to make a system work. A complication is that different kinds of institutions work differently - some are more effective than others. And it turns out that politics and careers work are differently institutionalised. However out-of-touch its system may be, a government sets itself up to voice it as inclusive of its constituencies. But the CDI is voicing impartiality as a claim for extracting its own advantage. This is institutionally dissonant, and studies of [Why Nations Fail](#) show the mismatch to be critical. Extractive institutions eventually collapse; the greater survival value is in institutional inclusiveness. It works because people stay close if they are treated as though it is they that matter. Claims to a special standing in the estimation of 'the great and the good', made by people with letters after their name, can look like self-interested élitist posturing. And sometimes they are.

There is more - Institutions need well-structured descriptions, rules and functions - 'what are we talking about?', 'how will we make it work?', 'what do we require of our people?'. The process produces lists of what's important, scripts for success, and nudges to help to get things moving. And here's another complication - well-defined descriptions, rules and functions work well in stable situations. They fall apart when people have to

think for themselves - and on-the-hoof. It probably doesn't hurt to have a plan, but plans are less-and-less likely to work. It's the process of planning which works - rehearsing possibilities and adapting responses. Institutionalising is a nightmare when the structure of yesterday's claims is undermined by the dynamics of today's change. Could this be careers work?

In response to change there's much political talk of the need for a 'change of culture'. And here's another complication. The talk is easy, but getting people to let go of what they're used to, or were trained to do, or that they enjoy, or what seems to work well enough... any combination can give a reforming manager more sleepless nights. A culture conveys the beliefs, values and expectations which shape how people get on together. It frames what people in the institution can see - and not see. And that can draw a curtain over what we call 'transparency' - some questions are not acknowledged let alone answered. Where the culture is strong it takes nerve to let go. It takes outstanding courage to expose or oppose.

Some of the significant workings of such a frame is set out in an account of how loyalty clings to the way things are. That loyalty is characterised as [The Righteous Mind](#). A culture claiming such loyalty supports people in clinging to what will no longer help. It can cause good people to do bad things. The outcomes can be catastrophic. Aware careers workers detect what interests a righteous mind is canvassing. But, in an inclusive institution alert to change, that loyalty becomes a question for a conversation, not a claim for respect. If professionals want any part of such an open conversation, then they need to bring trained expertise into exchange with experienced reality. Both rate a hearing. It is a bold independence, because such a conversation can change minds - in both directions.

The kind of results that we can expect from all this are set out in [Cooperative Problem Solving](#). It speaks of learning partnerships, where students, educators and the people they seek to help work together - careers workers and their stakeholders. Stakeholders are not shareholders. They include families, their communities, their places of education and their labour representation. Do careers workers belong here?

When stakeholders find that they are recognised in these ways, then they see a point in taking part. And when careers work is established, it is not because careers workers claim it from stakeholders, it's because stakeholders offer it to careers workers.

- **6: is any of this possible?**

It's easier to claim impartiality than, like Rohan O'Grady hero, to live and breathe it. Signs of decay would be in the protection of one's own status and survival. Examples are deference to the influential, manoeuvring for advancement, and shaping programmes to attract funding. None of this is either impartial or independent. Is any of it found in careers work?

At their worst, the failures would involve manipulating students and misleading clients. That might mean failing to question the damaging requirements of institutionalised systems. Resisting such impulses needs a grip on [Working with Systems](#) [BL05] System orientation is a measure of the independence that careers workers can muster, when they are dealing with pressure from others. You might recognise this as institutional pressures. There is also political and commercial lobbying. There are even professional controls. Anything like that going on around you?

My bet is that few of us careers workers have entirely clean sheets on system orientation. We may not be as impartial or independent as we like to think we are. I can't help wondering whether some careers workers have yet noticed that their claim to impartiality is contradicted by their own action.

Nonetheless, the mention of 'impartiality' gets an audible murmur of approval and a visible nodding of heads. The idea is more impressive than the reality. Nonetheless, it's been installed as 'a good thing'. Maybe a lack of clarity about what it means, rescues it from being put to a searching test. That would be a good project for the CDI. After all, the celebration of what might turn out to be a failure would not do anyone's status or survival any good - would it?

- **7: which way is forward?**

I find it impossible to think about this without being invaded by images of global finance making instant and hemispheric transfers of capital greater than a nation-state's annual spend. And, for the most part, the whole electronic process is untouched by human hand.

Such power changes everything, and careers work can't hope to be exempt. In the past its development has been framed by practice built into a person-centered programme called Sure-start, and thinking set out in a government policy statement called 'Every Child Matters'. Not now - another government expects careers work to harness its impartiality to the pursuit of unfettered economic competitiveness. This is a retrograde paradigm shift, raising serious [Questions for Learning and Work](#).

The idea of [Learning from Experience](#) [BL14] draws on well-established thinking that first mooted the idea of a civil society. It was originally set out to organise citizenship's independence of commercial and political leverage. And so civil society is older and bigger than 'the big society'. A prime minister's big idea is actually a resuscitation of a right-wing president's hopes for small government. By contrast, civil society does not make things easier for commerce or government. It's more independent than that - by institutionalising social systems and positioning them to voice to stakeholder interests.

Finding that everything is changing means changing what to do about it. Careers work must work with the confusion, loss and stress that hemispheric flows bring in their wake. And conventional careers work is in no position to enable people to navigate that change. It needs more time, more stage-by-stage learning, and more conversational questioning than edge-of-timetable careers work has ever been in a position to consider. There are emerging possibilities, set out in [What Educators Can Do](#) [BL40]. They reach way beyond what careers workers have been trained to do. This is root-and-branch curriculum reform.

I somehow doubt that commerce and policy are about to call for more theory. But professionalism cannot be a theory-free zone. It's true that there are useful theories and theories about which nobody has yet worked out what to do. A useful theory sets out what's going on, how it got this way, and what can be done about it. Every educator needs such levels of understanding, as surely as every medico needs them.

If careers work is ever bereft of theory, that emptiness will be invaded by headlines, myths, prejudice and limp compromises - all commitments to nothing in particular. So how would we know what to do about staff-development, about organisation-development, and programme-development? There would be no readable maps and no reliable compasses. What there would be are signposts erected for news management, damage limitation, lobbying and happy head-banging. It's [Why We Need a Career-learning Theory](#) [BL76].

At the close of the first century of careers-work's research and development, it has earned access to a better way forward than are offered by dominant institutions and their cultures. Career work needs somewhere else to go. Is it civil society?

Chris Targett's article is published in the journal of the CDI - noted for its claim to impartiality-in-pursuit-of-employability. What I've found and set down here persuades me that its claim will probably not succeed, and it may not matter if it fails. Chris Targett is right to headline the issue.

My persuaders are not particularly influential, they are more important than that - global trends and social consequences. They are changing the way people manage career. Careers work does well to stay in touch with the trends. And staying in touch means looking outside the careers-work literature.

But hidden behind any headline there is always an untold story. A savvy career-work profession sees through news management, to probe the interests that drive it. Their press releases, lobbying, donations and on-line hacking is power, and way beyond the reach of anything we are sold as 'empowerment'. Such distractions are useful to power, especially when they point to who should be adored and who must be condemned.

In that so-called political process a powerbase wants to be able to rely on a weakened government for its docility. That realisation is driving a generation into pulling out of civil, political and working life. It's what the culturally-influential Russell Brand calls '[On Revolution](#)'. The people he's influencing need an independently alert careers work to rise above this - to where helpers and their students can work together on wider causes, deeper effects and firmer bases for action.

If this is anything more than my paranoia it demands a serious rethink. And, for me, that's theory. But what can theory do that it's not already doing? I find the clue in the word 'conversation' - intensively developed in what is called dialogic theory. It can catalyse a radical rethink of careers work's underpinning. And that will enable careers workers in making their expertise available to...

... **relocating - linking expertise to experience**

... **reframing - expanding the perspectives of both**

... **renewing - catalysing new bases for action**

The CDI rightly provides theory-training for its members. If careers work is not to join the conversation empty-handed, it needs an understanding of how things are and what can be done about them. Because a conversation includes the possibility of change-of-mind, it can do more than hold onto theory, it can expand it.

I believe I know careers work well enough to trust that careers workers are engaging with organisations and their stakeholders now. If what I say adds anything to what they do it might be to signpost the ideas. Long ago, a participant set me straight on that...

'we already know the music Bill, you've given us the lyrics'

The lyrics here apply recent thinking on [What Educators Can Do](#) [BL40] to what impartial careers workers do – without fear, favour or affection. There's more, it speaks of an independent professionalism. I have to confess that I doubt it's a good idea to say a bald 'no' to your boss. Better to open a conversation among any whose interested attention you can attract - find friends.

Suggestions for adaptable ideas-for-action might well help. And some have cropped up here. There's a case for more complete and interesting labour-market information. Students need to find 'self' in relation to other people and their points-of-view. We can see how cooperative problem-solving can equip people for learning for living. And whatever is done needs to be informed by on-going exchange between careers workers and their stakeholders.

But, however promising the action might be, organisationally embedding it is never a doddle. Careers-work institutions range from village primaries to cosmopolitan universities. Each is installing its own system, framed by a culture, making claims, offering inclusion, developing a narrative, seeking loyalty, finding a philosophy and balancing interests. There's more than one song here, and more than one place to start singing.

There are also dangers. Chris Targett doesn't go this far, but I do: no contemporary organisation does itself any favours by turning its back on what's going on globally and socially. It would be to preside over a redundant institution, nursing a moribund culture. The song would be over, and the melody would not linger on.

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