OPTIMISING CHOICES

CLUES TO A FUTURE CAREER DIRECTION

The Institute Of Guidance Counsellors

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Contents

1. Introduction

We all know people who go to work each day and enjoy the challenges and tasks associated with their chosen occupation. These are individuals who, generally, have fulfilling working lives, and for whom work is a meaningful and stimulating experience. However, on the other hand, there are also individuals who, day in and day out, year in year out, struggle to find any real purpose in their chosen field of work other than the financial reward that is necessary for survival. For them, work is a means to an end, something that facilitates meeting their financial obligations. It can be argued that such outcomes do not happen by chance and that various factors have come into play to determine if an individual enjoys or dislikes their work. For those that find themselves in a fulfilling job are said to be in a working environment that matches their interests, aptitude and personal characteristics. Those that find themselves in a working environment they do not enjoy may have to perform tasks that do not match their interests or aptitudes or personal characteristics or indeed all three.

Individuals may have an interest in a particular area but not the aptitudes necessary to perform in that area. Others may have the aptitudes to perform in a certain job but have no interest in doing so. For example, some people may have an aptitude for Maths but have no interest in it. Others may have an interest in being a professional footballer but do not have the aptitudes required for that job. Do plane spotters have an interest in being a pilot but not the aptitudes required to qualify for such a job? Therefore, to maximise job/career satisfaction it is necessary to find a job whose tasks match both their interest *and* aptitudes.

Pilots are required to have a strong aptitude in spacial awareness (ability to see in 3-D). Similarly, architects require the same aptitude. Leaving aside interest, it therefore could be argued that a pilot would enjoy being an architect and an architect would enjoy being a pilot – after all both jobs require that same aptitude. However, what are the tasks a pilot has to perform? The pilot has to follow a definitive check list of tasks to prepare for a flight and continue to perform a predetermined and prescribed set of tasks during the flight. The pilot cannot under any circumstance deviate from these tasks and decide to do their own thing as their mood might dictate. Therefore, pilots work in an environment that requires the individual to be comfortable in a controlled situation and follow procedures with no room for deviation from these predetermined step by step tasks. A pilot who enjoys their work has the personality traits that makes them comfortable in such an environment. On the other hand an architect's working environment allows for a high degree of individual freedom and plenty of room for the individual to design what they like in a way that they like. An architect that enjoys their job has the personality traits that are comfortable in such an environment. Would a pilot become very uncomfortable in an architect's office if they were given the freedom to do what they want? Would that pilot try and find the rule book that would tell them what steps to follow? Would the architect become uncomfortable when instructed to follow the pilots check list or would they want to do what they feel like doing?

These examples bring into play the idea that the characteristics of the tasks in a job should match, as far as is possible, the personal characteristics of the individual. An accountant performs tasks that are logical, step by step, and requires everything to be in the right place on a balance sheet. Furthermore, what is an account's home like? Is it neat and tidy, is the CD collection arranged in alphabetical order, is everything in its place? Is this because he is an accountant or is the accountant's mind naturally working that way? Is the accountant's mind neat and tidy with everything in its place and has that accountant found a working environment that has similar characteristics?

An actuary and a Maths teacher have a similar interest and aptitude for the subject of Mathematics. However, why has one become an actuary and the other a Maths teacher? Has the actuary personality traits that are matched by working on their own at a desk solving problems, while the Maths teacher has personality traits that are matched by their constant interactions with students?

Two individuals may have an aptitude and interest in a working environment that requires them to be up and about, working with their hands and creating things. Landscape gardening and cooking are areas of work that would seem to satisfy these conditions. However, the personality of one individual may dictate that the individual who is more laid back and prefers a less pressured working environment may opt for landscape garden as opposed to being a chef with its highly pressurised working environment.

Imagine Rory McElroy and Jonathon Sexton have an equal interest and aptitude for both golf and rugby. Has Rory McElroy chosen golf over rugby because he has personality traits that are more comfortable relying on himself rather than in an environment where Jonathon Sexton is more comfortable relying on others and others relying on him? Imagine the most outgoing, loudest and extrovert person you know, should they become a librarian? Imagine the most introvert and quiet person you know, should they become a stand-up comedian? Imagine the student who resents being told to get their hair cut and having to wear a school uniform. Would they be comfortable in an environment like the Army or Garda?

Therefore, the greater the overlap between an individual's interests, aptitudes, *and* personal characteristics and those required by the job or area of study the greater the degree of satisfaction when engaged in that occupation or occupation. The overlap may be seen on the following page.
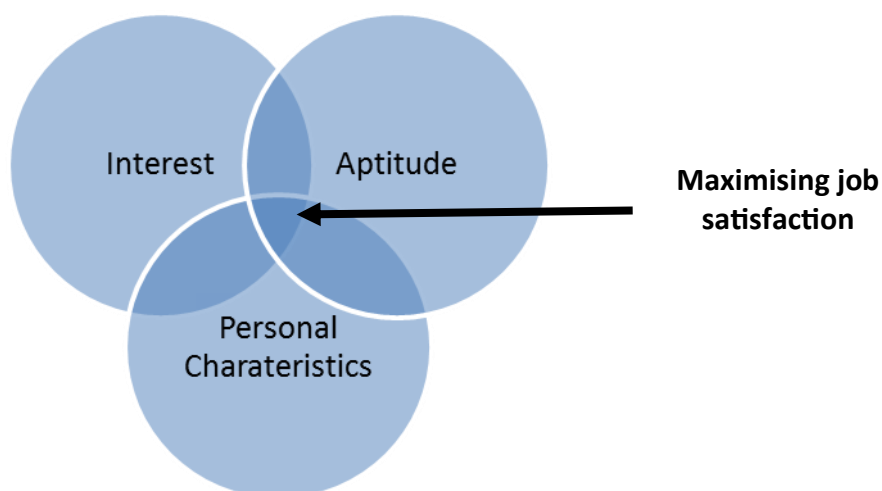
In order to maximise an individual's ability to make the right choices in terms of courses to study or occupation, it is necessary to know, as much as possible, about their own interests, aptitudes, and personal characteristics. This requires the individual to develop a certain degree of self-awareness and be able to read and interpret what makes them *tick*. Once an individual knows as much as possible about themselves (step 1), step 2 is now necessary, i.e. to find a course/job that allows the individual to find an area of study or occupation that matches, as much as possible, their interest, aptitudes and personal characteristics. A common mistake is for individuals to skip step 1 and instead carry out step 2. However, it can be argued that there is no point in knowing all the details about all the courses/jobs that are available if the individual does not know *themselves.*

Therefore, it is more important to find out about oneself than it is to find out about various jobs. There is no one action or event that can be undertaken that will help an individual known their interests, aptitudes, and personal characteristics. This should be viewed as a continuous life long *process* that constantly changes and never ends.

Adolescent development is a multifaceted, dynamic process that sees the individual strive to seek his own identity in the adult world. Vocational identity is an important part of their overall identity. Therefore, it is no surprise that having a job that society values – and doing it well – enhances self-esteem and aids in the development of an increasingly secure, stable sense of identity.[1]

The process that is adolescence, possesses many difficulties with which the individual must learn to cope. These include biological, intellectual, and cognitive changes. In addition, difficulty in choosing a career can be viewed in part as a problem in the development of a clear sense of [their new] identity.[2] Consequently, deciding on and preparing for a vocation is one of the major developmental tasks of adolescence.[3]

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[1] *John Janeway Conger and Nancy L. Galambos, Adolescence and Youth, 5th ed. (New York: Longman, 1997) p 243.*
[2] *Janeway Conger and Nancy L. Galambos, Adolescence and Youth, p 246.*
[3] *Janeway Conger and Nancy L. Galambos, Adolescence and Youth, p 263.*

Despite adolescents wanting to have a clear, specific career objective,[4] almost all adolescents have difficulty discovering the type of work for which they are best suited or which they would most enjoy.[5] There is no easy way to know which jobs they would be able to do successfully and which they would enjoy doing.[6]

Since growth depends on both an individual's capacity to benefit from experiences and the kind and quality of environmental stimulation available,[7] the person's past and immediate environment[8] provide a rich source of information which can help him to embark on this voyage of self-discovery. The individual's immediate environment – whether happy or unhappy – is an essential source of exploration that may provide clues to good career directions. Investigating the climate of the individual's experiences – in terms of leisure interests, school performance, experience of work, the individual's imagination, and psychological disposition – may suggest what type of work or further study or training may provide the optimum person-environment fit.

2. The Individual's Personality

As an individual moves through the teenage years, there are clearly defined stages of both cognitive growth and social reasoning. During the middle and late stages of adolescence the individual begins to *think* in a more abstract way. The adolescent begins to develop the ability to take on the perspective of others using a process called "perspective thinking."[9] As the teenager moves onto the latter stages of adolescence, they begin to see how they relate to others. This "social cognition" enables the individual to think more about themselves and "watch [themselves] as though from above." This "egocentric thinking" is a very important part of the process of self-analysis that is necessary in order that the adolescent be "self-evaluative." In addition, "controlled processing" – the ability to manipulate new information – and "critical thinking" – making judgments after assessing a situation – also begin to develop and become more pronounced in the adolescent's way of thinking. Moreover, the ability to deal with a problem that may have many possible outcomes –"divergent thinking"– begins to be established within the adolescent's thought processes.

In childhood and early adolescence, an individual may have viewed themselves as being tall, short, or sporty. In later adolescence, the individual develops the ability to recognise more "internal characteristics" such as "brave, intelligent, kind, impulsive shy, loud, witty." Useful avenues that are worth exploring are: "*What personality traits do you most admire in yourself*?" "*What do you think people like about you*?" "*Which talents stand out most*?" "*What type of person do you think you are*?*" This deeper form of self-exploration can be relatively easy for some adolescents. Others find these types of questions uncomfortable or difficult to answer. In such cases, it may be useful to remember that, to an extent, the individual has already answered these questions unconsciously by choosing certain types of people to be their friends and choosing certain activities in which to get involved.

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[4] *Norman A. Sprinthall and W. Andrew Collins, Adolescent Psychology, 3rd ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. 1995) p 468.*

[5] *Nancy J. Cobb, Adolescence – Continuity, Change, and Diversity, 4th ed., (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2001) p 414.*

[6] *Janeway Conger and Galambos, Adolescence and Youth, 5th ed. p 240.*

[7] *Sprinthall and Collins, Adolescent Psychology, 3rd ed., p 21.*

[8] *Lynda Ali and Barbara Graham, The Counselling Approach To Careers Guidance, (London: Brunner-Routledge, 2004) p 106.*

[9] *John Dacey and Maureen Kenny, Adolescent Development, (Wisconsin: Brown & Benchmark Publishers, 1994) p 114.*

3. Pastimes & Hobbies

An individual's hobbies and pastimes may give a useful marker to future career directions. Such activities provide many benefits to the development of the adolescent. These include contributions that can be made in the following areas: physical health, mental health, improvement of social status, self-evaluation.[10] In addition, the pleasure and satisfaction the individual derives from hobbies and pastimes can help meet important "personal needs" in the adolescent's life. In terms of the adolescent, the individual may be interested in team sports as opposed to the more solitary sports such as golf or running. Does the former mean the individual is comfortable relying and others and others relying on them? Does the latter mean the individual is more comfortable relying on themselves? If the individual does not like sport, what does this say – in a positive way - about their personality? The individual may find inspiration in reading or chess. Does this mean they prefer more solitary activities? Or do they prefer working in a group setting as illustrated by their involvement in group activities such as the scouts. Has the individual found satisfaction in performing in the school play or choir or in a debating team? Does this indicate some form of creative expression of the individual's personality? Do they enjoy being creative with their hands as expressed through cooking or fixing things at home? Do they have a preference for the outdoor life as expressed through hobbies such as hiking or fishing? Do they enjoy acquiring new skills as demonstrated by taking a course in life-saving or music lessons? Do television habits also give some clues? For example, have they a particular interest in a certain issues as illustrated by watching news or current affairs programmes or watching wildlife programmes on television? Do they read certain types of books or particular stories in a newspaper? Have they involved themselves in community activities such as voluntary work or first aid classes? Whatever makes the individual feel good is always worth considering. The things that are enjoyable, that are special, may provide the best clues to the kinds of work that the individual can be good at, and enjoy the most.[11]

4. School Academic Activities

It can be argued that hobbies and pastimes provide more positive clues than compulsory school activities because they are activities the individual opts to do even though they don't have to. Notwithstanding this, it is always useful to examine the adolescent's experiences of compulsory activities in school. The experiences of adolescents within the school setting may have repercussions for their attitudes towards, and ability to adjust to, the adult world of work.[12] With this in mind, it is important to discern what subjects within the school curriculum the individual likes or dislikes. What is it about Maths that the student enjoys? Is it the logical step-by-step approach that Maths requires? Is it the fact that it produces black and white answers as opposed to an essay which has no right or wrong answers? If the individual has a preference for subjects like English and History, is it because these subjects provide the comfort of knowing that there is a spectrum of acceptable answers and that the construction of answers allow for personal freedom in story-telling and the development of an argument or a personal line of thinking?

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[10] *Elizabeth B. Hurlock, Adolescent Development, 4th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972) p 141.*
[11] *Louise Welsh Schrank, How To Choose The Right Career, (Illinois: VGM Career Horizons, 1991) p 17.*
[12] *John C. Colman and Leo Hendrey, The Nature of Adolescence, 2nd ed., (London: Routledge, 1990) p 179.*

Does the individual engage in extra reading above that required by the school curriculum? Maybe the individual has a preference for a subject like Geography and they enjoy the insights this subject provides into the world around us? Was their interest stimulated by the world of business? Was it the insights into how businesses work or was it the black and white logic and step-by-step approach of accounting? Did the individual enjoy the world of science? If so, was it how Physics explains how things work, or how Biology explains how living organisms behave and interact with each other, or was it how Chemistry gives an insight into the composition of everything and the changes they undergo? Does the individual find comfort in the creatively expressive activities of drawing, painting or sculpting in Art, or in playing an instrument in Music? Or does the individual find expression in languages like Irish, French, German or Spanish? Is the individual intrigued by discussions of social, spiritual or moral issues in Religion, C.S.P.E. or S.P.H.E. classes? Does the individual enjoy being up and about and not confined to a desk when working with their hands and a particular material in subjects like Metalwork, Technology or Construction Studies? Has the individual experienced Technical Graphic at Junior Certificate level or Design & Computer graphics at Leaving Certificate level. If so, did they enjoy this area of practical work that is more computer based? In the words of the adolescent, discovering whatever gives them a "buzz" can positively contribute to the direction taken for further study of career choice. Even if some of the answers to the above questions point to a negative experience of learning, that can be seen as a positive pointer to future learning.

It should also be remembered that the adolescent's experience in school might not have been positive. Indeed, the school environment the individual is experiencing, or has experienced, may be having a negative or detrimental effect on their development. This may have resulted in a poor person-environment fit[13] with regard to the type of school, or the academic demands of a education system that does not suit them. Some negative psychological changes associated with adolescent development might result in a mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities afforded them by the school they attend.[14] It is always productive to acknowledge such experiences and to work within this frame of reference of the individual, and to try and prevent any such negative experiences from hindering or closing off any career options that may be relevant.

Examining both non-vocational and academic activities serves to recognise "that experiences which were not specifically vocational in content or intent nevertheless exert an important influence on the individual's vocational choice and adjustment,"[15] and can give vital clues to what activities may help the student towards future self-actualisation.

Finally, it is worth remembering *don't let what you can't do interfere with what you can do!*

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[13] *Janeway Conger and Galambos, Adolescence and Youth, 5th ed. p 222.*

[14] *John W. Santrock, Adolescence, 10th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005) p 405.*

[15] *Super, & others, Career Development: Self-Concept Theory, (New Jersey: College Entrance Examination Board, 1963) p 405.*

5. Creativity

Creativity is also another area worth exploring. Authors are creative and express their creativity by writing. Musicians are creative and express their creativity through playing an instrument. Singers are creative and express their creativity through singing. A sculptor is creative and express their creativity through making things with their hands. An actor or actress is creative and express their creativity through characters. David Beckham is creative and expresses his creativity on the football field. Is a mechanic as creative as a painting restorer, and do they differ only in the way they express their creativity? A barrister is creative and expresses creativity through the presentation of an argument. A painter is creative in a different way, an architect is creative, a photographer is creative, and a dress designer is creative, a carpenter is creative, a landscape gardener is creative, a chef is creative, a film director is creative, and a person involved in marketing or advertising or public relations, is creative. By this definition, is an engineer creative? Is an accountant creative? Is a surgeon creative? If yes, all have found different ways to express their creativity. Are we all creative to some degree? Is the challenge to define our own creativity, (not just using the restrictive term *artistic*), and to find a way of expressing this creativity?

6. Experience of Work

In addition to exploring the individual's hobbies, and subjects that appeal to them, it is important to delve into the area of part time employment that many youngsters today have experienced. This first-hand experience of the world of work[16] may also take the form of work experience or voluntary work, as part of a formal school based programme, and can mark a particular turning point in young peoples' lives. These activities have the real potential to provide opportunities to investigate and experience learning and work opportunities before choosing them,[17] provide opportunities for *reality testing*, as well as helping an individual realise what career routes *not* to take.

In taking part in work at this stage in their career development, an adolescent can develop a number of valuable skills including, self-reliance, interpersonal skills, adaptability, flexibility, versatility, creative abilities and analytical skills.[18] In addition, this is an opportunity for recognising what kinds of work experience have given the individual pleasure[19] and so may inform the student about what activities are enjoyable and rewarding.[20] Holding a job can help adolescents develop a sense of responsibility and give them a feeling of being productive. Work can also develop general skills, ranging from interpersonal ones, such as getting along with co-workers, to personal ones, such as managing time. Some jobs may help adolescents discover where their interests lie, even if by exclusion – they may discover, for example, that they would not enjoy the same work in a full-time capacity.[21] When trying to gain insights from work experiences organised by schools, caution should be taken. Some individuals can misread their experiences.

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[16] *Gerry Jeffers, Work Experience Handbook, (Dublin: The Educational Company of Ireland, 1994) p 4.*

[17] *OECD Career Guidance: A Handbook for Policy Makers, Paris: 2004, p 64.*

[18] *Skills Work and Youth, (Dublin: Irish Congress of Trade Unions, 2000), p 19.*

[19] *Welsh Schrank, How To Choose The Right Career, p 17.*

[20] *Robert Nathan and Linda Hill, Career Counselling, (London: Sage Publications, 2000) p 61.*

[21] *Cobb, Adolescence – Continuity, Change, and Diversity, 4th ed., p 411.*

For example, if the individual was, for example, driving a forklift truck and loved it, was this enjoyment an indication of a lifetime career as a forklift driver or simply a reflection of the novelty of such an activity which may soon wear off? A male student may have enjoyed his work experience in a warehouse or office environment with other male adults and a female student may have enjoyed her experience in a working environment with women in their early twenties. Was this enjoyment rooted in the actual activities and tasks carried out, or was it a reflection of the individual feeling grown-up as a result of the atmosphere creative by the other employees in that environment? In addition, an individual's work experience in, for example, a public relations office may have been negative. However, was this negativity produced by being given menial tasks to carry out rather than a reflection of the individual's disliking of the wold of P.R.?

7. Role Models

A further area worth exploring with the adolescent is that of role models. Such role models may be significant adults in an individual's immediate circle such as a parent, aunt, uncle, older sibling, friend, or teacher. Or the person admired may exist at a remove and elicit admiration for some talent or value system, such as a musician, sports star, or a cultural iconic figure. The questions used in clarifying the attitudes of the student should attempt to ascertain the reasons for their admiration of the figure/s in question. For example: "*What is it about that individual's personality that you admire*?" "*What is it about your peers that has resulted in your selecting them as your close friends*?" These are probing questions that may produce a more insightful answer than simply allowing the individual to recite a list of names. Once the individual begins to describe what they like about the people they admire, insights into their own psychological disposition are revealed.[22] The process of recognising the type of person the individual would like to work with, or which group of people they would instinctively be drawn to most and enjoy being with,[23] becomes an interesting sign post in the journey. As a consequence of this exploration, the student may also be indirectly delving into the type of personality that they possess. This discussion also applies to why a person has chosen some people to be their friends and *not* others. Have the former the same values, interests, and personality traits?

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[22] *Robert Nathan and Linda Hill, Career Counselling, (London: Sage Publications, 2000) p 602.*
[23] *Welsh Schrank, How To Choose The Right Career, p 10.*

8. The Individual's Imagination

One other area that can be useful to tap into is the adolescent's imagination. This can provide a number of complementary avenues of investigation, and can facilitate checking of how realistic the individual's view of their future is. Given that the real self (people's perception of what they are) may match or be congruent with their ideal self (what they would most like to be), this delving into the student's imagination provides an opportunity to assess any discrepancies between the real self and the ideal self, and to challenge – in an appropriate way – such discrepancies. For example, is the individual taking into account the academic qualifications required, or the need for future training for this fantasy job; is the individual considering the employment prospects or are they ignoring the constraints of the real world.[24] After all, achieving congruence between the individual's personality and the characteristics of a chosen occupation, depends, in part, on the availability of occupations allowing for the expression of one's personality.[25]

On the other hand, delving into an individual's unconstrained imagination may bring forth further avenues to explore or, at the very least, allow the individual to gain further understanding of the type of person they are. Unleashing an unconstrained imagination can allow the individual to shift [their] point of view; to dream up new ideas for things, imagine as many possible solutions to a particular problem as possible.[26] To find the best clues to careers that will bring the individual happiness they should begin with their own imagination. Imagine that you won the Lotto and had enough money for the rest of your life and that you never had to work again, but you wanted to? What job would you do? Or, if you were leaving school today and starting college tomorrow and could design your own degree, what would it be? When thinking this through, remember there are no points required for this degree and you have a guaranteed place. Imagine you had total freedom in this choice. For example, you can study whatever subject you like on Monday, and whatever subject you like on Tuesday, and so on, and they can be different subjects each day.

9. A Positive Asset Search

In well documented research, it is believed that all humans strive to make the most of their existence and that each person possesses the fundamental power to understand themselves and determine their own direction in life. With this in mind, it is always necessary to conduct a positive asset search and seek out the student's "strong points." This should be done in order to uncover, and tap into, what every individual possesses: that is, a fundamental decency and a talent for some task or activity that makes that individual unique. A positive self-evaluation depends upon a person finding some area of success somewhere. It may appear to some individuals that they have not succeeded at anything; yet, for some of those people, there may be activities that are not usually in the foreground of their awareness because these experiences are often taken for granted, or simply never thought about.[27]

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[24] *Nathan and Hill, Career Counselling, p 64.*
[25] *Louise Welsh Schrank, How To Choose The Right Career, (Illinois: VGM Career Horizons, 1991) p 57.*
[26] *Dacey and Kenny, Adolescent Development, p 124.*
[27] *Nathan and Hill, Career Counselling, p 75.*

This positive asset search is particularly important if the adolescent's academic record does not bring to light any area of success. It is therefore very important to explore beyond this narrow frame of reference. There may be talents that are beyond the scope of conventional academic measures. Sometimes these talents can be a greater indication of success in the world or work than an aptitude test or Junior/Leaving Certificate exam results. For example, has the individual a pronounced determination to work hard and succeed despite the outcome not being perfect? Has the individual enthusiasm and self-confidence? Are they loyal and honest? Have they a high degree of common sense or motivation? Have they a well-developed sense of entrepreneurial instinct or creativity, and inventiveness? Has the individual the ability to persuade and motivate others? Have they strong senses of empathy and ability to help others? Have they a strong sense of social responsibility? Can the individual be realistic, optimistic, tolerate stress, be flexible? Has the individual an affinity for interacting with children, elderly people, or indeed animals? Do they have good int*er*personal and int*ra*personal skills? Remember, school based aptitude tests or academic exams cannot measure these very important emotional intelligences.[28]

Caution should be taken when digging for personality traits. It may transpire that an individual does not have a high degree of interpersonal skills and is not comfortable in circumstances that require a high degree of interaction with others. This should not be seen as a negative, it is just the way people are. We can't all be outgoing and extrovert. Consider the computer programmer that spends all day working alone at their desk or an archivist working on their own in a library. These individuals enjoy their working environment because of the fact that they are more comfortable working on their own. After all, it can be argued that an Olympic long distance runner has more self-discipline that a member of the Olympic basketball team who needs the collective lift from other individuals around them. An individual may be deemed as being not very patient. This should not be seen as a negative, rather a personal trait and accept that that is just the way they are. Indeed, accepting this may provide clues to a future working environment that may match that personality trait. For example, they may not be suited to working as a research scientist who may have to wait years to reach the final goal of discovering a new drug. That scientist may enjoy that area of work because they are more comfortable in a working environment that focuses on the process rather than the end product. Remember, *success is not about how smart you are, but how you are smart.*

[28] *Santrock, Adolescence, 10th ed., p 148.*

10. Blocks to Career Development

10.1 The Inarticulate Teenager

Some adolescents are blessed with the ability to express themselves verbally; while others have somewhat succumbed to the inevitable onslaught of hormones and may suffer from, what could be referred to as "a poverty of language".[29] Experience shows that a distinction should be made between those individuals who could be described as being *quiet* and those who might be described as *shy*. The former might best be viewed as just another normal characteristic of the individual and, as such, be treated accordingly. The latter however, may require a different approach. It might be necessary to determine the source of the individual's shyness. One such reason for this may be the lack of cognitive development in terms of *thinking,* as described later. The source of an individual's shyness or reluctance to take part in the self-analysis process may also be as a result of: conditioning within the family, conditioning within the peer group, or some once-off or continuous experience within the school. Inability to express oneself in the area of self-exploration may also be as a result of a deficiency in the skills necessary to be introspective[30] or inward looking. This may be an indication that the individual is simply *not ready* to engage in this process.

10.2 Unrealistic Goals

Some adolescents, for various reasons, may have developed an inaccurate self-concept and/or unrealistic vocational goal-setting behaviour.[31] Students frequently approach career decisions with maladaptive beliefs and myths. These can be about themselves ("I'm not very smart"), a profession ("You have to be self-confident to be a lawyer"), or the conditions that lead to satisfaction with career ("I wouldn't be happy in a profession unless I made a lot of money at it").[31] As a result of an inaccurate view of their abilities and talents an adolescent may, for example, dream of becoming a doctor but may never obtain the academic qualifications to enter medical school. Some students may possess the ability and aptitude for a particular profession, but have an unrealistic view regarding the amount of work required and are unable to understand the need for a positive attitude towards work and learning.[32]

An individual who may have a "wishful estimation of their ability far beyond [their] capacities"[33] may have developed such a view through "limited experiences, which makes it impossible for [them] to assess [their] capacities realistically. They may also, consciously or unconsciously, make unhealthy comparisons with peers, siblings or parents. Such a situation may also have arisen as a result of self-esteem issues and an unwillingness to accept their limitations. However unrealistic goals manifest themselves, the source of such goals can sometimes be rooted in a discrepancy between the real self and the ideal self. Whatever the root cause of unrealistic behaviour, the adolescent may adopt various strategies in order to protect themselves, their image of self, and their feelings of worth. Such strategies are discussed later.

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[29] *Don C. Dinkmeyer, Don C. Dinkmeyer, Jr., and Len Sperry, Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy, (Ohio: Merrill Publishing Company, 1987) p 36.*

[30] *Dacey and Kenny, Adolescent Development, p 169.*

[31] *John J. Pietrofesa and Howard Splete, Career Development: Theory and Research, (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1975) p 35.*

[32] *Herr and Cramer, Career Guidance and Counseling Through the Lifespan, p 412.*

[33] *Hurlock, Adolescent Development, 4th ed., p 193.*

10.3 Self-Esteem and Self -Image

There may be adolescents who, through previous experiences (be they in the home, at school, or in their peer group), may have developed a strategy that results in what is known as "self-defeating beliefs."[34] Since "self-esteem is important to adolescent motivation towards success, achievement, and mental health," and since "self-esteem is recognized as a powerful motivational force,"[35] it is important to be conscious of the sources and symptoms of low self-esteem and how the adolescent "acts out" such perceptions of themselves. One source of low self-esteem and a negative self-image can result from previous experiences, whether in the home, peer group, or school. The adolescent may have experienced repeated academic "failure" in the school or they may have suffered negatively from not achieving – as viewed by their parents and/or peers – in other areas such as sport or other leisure pursuits. Deliberately or otherwise, they may have had their attempts to be successful mocked or their ideas ridiculed[36] by those that matter to them. This may have resulted in their feelings of worth and being valued eroded. In extreme cases, it is often observed that adolescents who perceive that they matter very little to others are depressed, unhappy, and report a wide variety of other negative emotional states.[37] Whatever the source or cause of low self-esteem, some adolescents may be motivated to protect their self-worth by developing various coping strategies in an effort to protect themselves from further negative attention and or prevent further erosion of their view of themselves.

Research has shown that adolescents in such situations are motivated to "protect their self-worth by avoiding failure." These "self-handicapping strategies"[38] may include one or more of the following. "Non-performance" is one such strategy, where the individual may avoid eye contact with a teacher; another strategy is "shame effort", where the individual asks questions they already know the answer. Some individuals may use "procrastination" and delay any effort to attempt a task so that they can later blame time management in order to direct attention away from the real issues. Another strategy is for the individual to set "unreachable goals" so that they can use the excuse that no adolescent could possible achieve what they had aspired to. Another strategy is known as the "academic wooden leg" whereby the adolescent admits to minor failings such as panicking in an exam in order to avoid acknowledging a greater weakness. In addition adolescents may adopt "negative aspirations" as a reflection of their desire to avoid failure. In some cases individuals may adopt a "negative identity" and do the opposite to what is expected in order to distract attention from the real issue. Indeed, if some adolescents with low self-esteem do experience success they may attribute such success to some "capricious factor as opposed to personal causation."[39] These scapegoating or avoidance strategies often extend to the area of study. For example, students often comparing the exams results obtained by their peers who may be achieving lower scores as a way of finding comfort and/or distracting from their own performance.

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[34] *Nathan and Hill, Career Counselling, p 69.*
[35] *Thomas P. Gullotta, Gerald R. Adams, and Carol A. Markstrom, The Adolescent Experience, 4th ed., (California: Academic Press, 2000) p 96.*
[36] *Dacey and Kenny, Adolescent Development, p 123.*
[37] *Gullotta, Adams, and Markstrom, The Adolescent Experience, 4th ed., p 97.*
[38] *Santrock, Adolescence, 10th ed., p 439.*
[39] *Colman and Hendrey, The Nature of Adolescence, 2nd ed., p 71.*

Another coping mechanism is where the adolescent aspires to grandiose or unrealistic goals which are doomed to failure and as a result the adolescent "will not admit his limitations; instead, he convinces himself that he has been blocked in the achievement of his goal by someone or something over which he has no control." From the adolescent's perspective such coping mechanisms make sense and indeed work in that they hide the truth, avoid exposing any weakness, and prevent further failure and thereby avoid feelings of "incompetence."

10.4 Family Influences

In career development, it is important to establish to what extent the student's thinking has been influenced, for good or bad, by the "family paradigm."[40] It is the influence of significant others or, "family pressures, models and messages…or sibling and birth order"[41] that can drive the adolescent into adopting a particular approach to their career. According to research "family influences on career development may be positive or negative."[42] In terms of blocks to career development, significant others can, consciously or unconsciously, have a detrimental impact on the adolescent's career development. Moreover, experience has shown that the adolescent often may not even be aware of unconscious influences, be they "direct or indirect," being exerted by some significant others in their lives. Families develop certain rules and boundaries that influence the roles of all family members, including their career roles. The idea that some families always produce farmers or doctors or business people is a reflection of family rules. Family systems also seek to maintain the status quo – keep things the way they have always been. When a family member tries to do something different, the family system may be upset, putting pressure on the individual to conform to family tradition.[43] This can even extent to *not* going to college or further education.

The influences of significant others can take several forms. If the parent is a very strong domineering person who, to date, has made all the decisions for the adolescent, then the student may abdicate the responsibility[44] of making decisions to their parent(s), or the student may attempt to relinquish to others their right and responsibility to make decisions.[45]

In some cases, parents may attempt to force an adolescent into a particular area of work or study. This style of parenting may result in a career direction that is contrary to the student's wishes or indeed interest, aptitudes, and personal characteristics. This type of situation may manifest itself in the adolescent's compliance – from an early age – in thinking that there is no other path for them other than that automatically chosen by their parent(s), and/or by older sibling(s). Other adolescents may display signs of submission in order to avoid upsetting or disappointing parents, or feeling guilty about going against their wishes. Another possibility is that the adolescent may wish to rebel and choose a certain direction to spite their parents.

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[40] *Cobb, Adolescence – Continuity, Change, and Diversity, 4th ed., p 305.*
[41] *Linda Seligam. Developmental Career Counseling and Assessment. (California: Sage Publications, 1994) p 40.*
[42] *Hurlock, Adolescent Development, 4th ed., p 215.*
[43] *Dacey and Kenny, Adolescent Development, p 333.*
[44] *Ali and Graham, The Counselling Approach To Careers Guidance, p 107.*

Some sports-mad individuals sight physiotherapy as a possible career path. They sight their sporting interests as evidence as well as their experience of having had physiotherapy. As well as fixing their aliment, did the physiotherapist make them feel comfortable during each session and make them feel they were the most important person in the world? Does that individual realise that to train as a physiotherapist they will have to work in hospitals with very elderly, and sometimes uncooperative, patients? This example serves to illustrate that - while some clues may genuinely point in one particular direction – other evidence, clues and outcomes can be ignored or supressed.

Some individuals express a strong desire to turn their hobby into a career. Examples are the student who took part in the school play and wants to be the next Colin Farrell, the footballer who wants to be the next David Beckham, the individual who plays in their own band and wants to be the next Bono. It needs to be remembered that Colin Farrell, David Beckham, and Bono, are only one in several thousand – if not more. For the vast majority of individuals, an interest in acting, sport or music (and most other hobbies and past-times), will remain being expressed through hobbies *only* rather than a fulltime career. On the other hand, if the individual can become the next Colin Farrell, David Beckham, or Bono – go for it!

In secondary school some teachers have the ability to inspire and ignite a passion for a particular subject. This can be seen as a constructive experience if an individual's career decision is positively and genuinely influenced by this. However, care needs to be taken so that the individual does not mistake enjoyment of a subject with the enjoyment of the teacher and the atmosphere in the class. Selecting a subject to study at third level based on a certain teacher's style or personality or the atmosphere in that class *only* can result in a negative experience with that subject when it is studied at third level.

10.8 Gender Issues

One of the unhealthy restrictions placed upon individuals in terms of career development is gender stereotyping. Since every culture has its gender-role system and ascribes certain roles to men and woman, this can result in what is referred to as "barriers to development."[52] These barriers, while traditionally having a greater impact on women, for example in the field of engineering, can also affect men. For example, in Irish society today, primary teaching and nursing can sometimes be seen by adolescents – and indeed society in general – as "feminine,"[53] thereby possibly placing barriers between men and such professions. In addition, an adolescent, whether male or female, may also unconsciously restrict his or her options because of his or her own prejudices or family prejudices.

As with all issues that can prevent an individual fully exploring all suitable options, it is important not to deselect occupational options "because of gender."[54] Women and men should make choices and decisions more according to their authentic interests, talents, values, and preferences and to explore a wide variety of fields, subjects, and activities not labelled by sex.[55] Females can be farmers and males can be Montessori teachers.

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[52] *L. Sunny Hansen, Integrative Life Planning, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997) p 30*
[53] *Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, Career Development Interventions In The 21st Century, p 107.*
[54] *Seligman, Developmental Career Counseling and Assessment, p 190.*
[55] *Herr and Cramer, Career Guidance and Counseling Through the Lifespan, p 220.*

10.9 Disabilities

With 8.2% of the population[56] deemed to have a disability, the lack of opportunities imposed by their disability should not be compounded by ruling out possible career paths that may be suitable. This can occur if the disability *only* is used to define the person. This serves to ignore what the individual can do and focus only on what they can't. By focusing in on the positive aptitudes and personal characterises of the individual possible career options can be explored which might otherwise be ignored. The starting point for this process may be to allow the individual themselves list their positive attributes in an open and honest way. After all, it can be argued that we are all good at something – we just need to recognise it or have the opportunity of an experience to bring it out in us.

10.10 Emotional Issues

A growing number of adolescents have "emotional issues"[57] that need attending to before they are ready or able to embark on self-analysis and self-actualisation in terms of a career. It is pointless to bombard a student with detailed information on training courses and closing dates for applications, or even to attempt to help the student choose one career in preference to another, if there are deeper issues such as low self-esteem, an eating disorder, depression, or another emotional issue that is preventing the student from moving forward. Indeed, nobody, be they child or adult, can effectively deal with educational and career issues in their lives without first coming to terms with, and developing mechanisms to deal with, issues causing major personal or social difficulties in their lives.

10.11 Being Ready

Some students may simply not be ready to decide on a particular career or course of study. This sense of readiness may not become apparent until early or indeed late twenties. However, it should always be remembered that to force a decision from someone who is not ready can be detrimental in the long run and negate against a more accurate selection in the future. Other students may have narrowed down their choice to one/two particular areas but may still be unwilling to make a commitment. This reluctance to commit to any path may be because the decision is seen as too momentous to risk making a mistake. This can sometimes be the case when a student continues to find fault with every idea or suggestion put to them.

If a student has reached the end of their secondary education without discovering one area that interests them, it is sometimes useful to forget about finding a course that will result in a job/career. Instead, the student might focus on what would be interesting to study for the next 3/4 years and hope that during those years something will come to light that might give clues to a future career. This can also be a useful approach for students who have several areas of equal interest but are unable to select a specific one.

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[56] *http://www.cso.ie*

[57] *Liam Murphy, Counselling the Adolescent In A Changing Ireland: National Survey of Second Level Schools In Ireland: The Institute of Guidance Counsellors, 1993, p 23.*

11. Conclusion

The processes described in this booklet are exactly that, *a process*. It can result in frustration and disappointment for an individual if they seek out a single event or activity they believe can provide a definitive exact answer as to what career to follow. If a definitive answer is not yet available patience is required. The individual may have not yet have engaged in, or been exposed to, or given the opportunity to be involved in an activity that allows for a match with their interests, aptitudes and personal characteristics. Indeed, it can be argued that for most – but not all – to try and find the answer to what they will do for the rest of their lives is mis-guided. Consider that, at the age of 4 months, a soother provided us with the satisfaction we needed at that age. At 4 years of age this progressed to a cuddly toy. At 10 years of age this progressed to a more sophisticated toy and at the age of 14 this changed again as it did at the age of 17. These changes do not stop once we have reached the age of 18 or adulthood. A 22 year old will be satisfied going on a camping holiday with friends despite the rain and mud. At 30 years of age this progress onto a B & B, and later this progress on to hotel with all its mod-cons that we need to satisfy us. Therefore, it can be argued that the changes that take place with regard to stimuli that we needed up to the age of 18 will continue – albeit at a slower pace – for the rest of our lives. Therefore, if considering doing a degree, it might be advisable to do a degree based on what interests the individual has *now* and allow the experiences during the years doing that degree determine the next step. In other words, do a degree you enjoy and do a postgrad to get a job!

At the beginning of this booklet it was stated that;

> We all know people who go to work each day and enjoy the challenges and tasks associated with their chosen occupation. These are individuals who, generally, have fulfilling working lives, and for whom work is a meaningful and stimulating experience. However, on the other hand, there are also individuals who, day in and day out, year in year out, struggle to find any real purpose in their chosen field of work other than the kind of financial reward that is necessary for survival. For them, work is a means to an end, something that facilitates their meeting their financial obligations.

It needs to be acknowledged that this description highlights either end of a continuous spectrum or people. It is inconceivable to think that every individual will find that perfect job or occupation that provides a 100% match for their interests, aptitudes, and personal characteristics. Therefore, a more practical approach is for individuals to *strive towards* finding that perfect job while accepting they may only find an *optimum* fit. This is particularly important given the constraints of the economy, our aptitudes, financial position, and opportunities available.

Finally, consider the blissfully happy individual who is content with life despite their job having tasks that are not challenging or stimulating. What makes this individual perfectly happy with their lot? It may be because they derive their satisfaction from elsewhere in their life. Their gratification may be drawn from; their relationships with those that matter to them, the joy of being a good parent and providing for their children, from their involvement in coaching the under 7's and the quiet reflective moments they relishes when pursuing their hobby. Sometimes all we need are the simple things in life to make us happy.

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The Institute of Guidance Counsellors is the professional body for Guidance Counsellors in Ireland. Its members work in the Second, Further, Adult and Higher Education sectors. The main object of the Institute is to discuss, promote and research matters relating to guidance counselling services. The Institute also seeks to promote best practice and the professional development of its members in order to serve and protect the interest of those whom they serve and to maintain, develop, and advance the personal, social, educational and career development of individuals and groups through supporting guidance counselling practice.

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