

Symposium Edition: Learning for labour market transitions

Title: Exploring career decision-making styles across three European countries

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Abstract

Career decisions are amongst the most important we make. Unsurprisingly, much published research exists on this particular aspect of career behaviour. However, the overwhelming majority of studies have been carried out on young people making initial career decisions. This paper extends our understanding by examining how mid-career adults in three European countries (Denmark, France and Italy) actually make career decisions. Characteristic patterns of behavior recur when individuals approach points of transition or of crisis; each of these transitioning styles is illustrated by an iconic case. Emergent findings support the growing body of evidence that challenges the dominant policy and practice orthodoxy, which places rationality at the center of the process, by recognising the importance of emotion and context.

Key words: career, decision-making, transition, affect, cognition, context

Introduction

Individuals have to make career decisions throughout their lifespan. These decisions can and do have a profound impact on job prospects and life chances. Numerous studies have been carried out on career decision making over the past few decades, reflecting the importance of this concept in the careers research and literature (see, for example, Gati, Krausz & Osipow, 1996). The combined impact of two closely related traditions, namely talent matching (Parsons, 1908) and trait and factor (Holland, 1959, 1962, 1966, 1982) have been significant, with their primary propositions influential both in the literature and in careers practice (Bimrose, Barnes, Hughes & Orton, 2004). These propositions are: each individual has a unique set of traits that can be measured reliably and validly; particular occupations require that workers possess specific traits for success; the choice of an occupation is a rather straightforward process, with matching at the heart of the process; and finally that the closer the match between personal characteristics and job requirements, the greater the likelihood for success, productivity, and satisfaction. However, these propositions are based on highly questionable assumptions. For example, that it is possible to measure, objectively and accurately, individual aptitudes and attributes required for particular jobs and that individuals are naturally pre-disposed to engage in 'rational' behaviours that focus on maximising their economic benefits whenever it comes to job choice. Further, the propositions assume a degree of labour market stability, with jobs and sectors having predictable requirements, to which the objectively measured abilities of individuals can be matched. Whilst this may have been the case several decades ago when these models were developed, it is certainly no longer true, with volatility and fluidity now being defining characteristics of global labour markets. Additionally, in focusing on individual abilities, aptitudes and interests, the approach marginalises both the role that emotions might play in job choice, and crucially the key contexts in which individuals are trying to progress their careers. It is certainly not

appropriate, or indeed helpful, to underplay the role that emotions play in vocational behaviour (Kidd, 1998).

Consequently, the general approach to career decision making has gradually changed. While the 1960s saw a proliferation of literature relating to models that attempted to rationalise and simplify the decision making process, since the 1980s, there has been an increasing acceptance that decision-making is not simply rational or straightforward. For example, Gelatt (1962) proposed a sequential decision making framework, but 27 years later had changed his mind, proposing a model of positive uncertainty; a framework that helps clients deal with change and ambiguity, accept uncertainty and inconsistency, utilising the non-rational and intuitive side of thinking and choosing (Gelatt, 1989). Many authors have advocated a more individualised, flexible approach (Osipow & Gati, 1998) with a significant proportion of the literature exploring career decision making self efficacy, which refers to a person's beliefs concerning his or her ability to successfully, perform a given task or behaviour, and its various assessment models (Betz & Luzzo, 1996; Gianakos, 1999; Lee, 2005). The relationship between career decision making and vocational maturity has been the focus of research for some (e.g. Blustein, 1987) with the role of context emphasised by others (e.g. Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, & Early, 2005). Some researchers have explored the relationship between career decision making and career adaptability (Blustein, 1997; Creed, Fallon, & Hood, 2009; Duffy & Blustein, 2005; Duffy & Raque-Bogdan, 2010; Gunkel, Schlaegel, Langella, & Peluchette, 2010); Koen, Klehe, van Vianen, Zikic, & Nauta, 2010; Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009;; Super & Knasel, 1981; van Vianen, De Pater, & Preenen, 2009, 2009; Zikic & Klehe, 2006). It seems that decision making and adaptability are part of successful career transitions, both contributing positively to preparing for, and managing changes in the workplace, be they voluntary or involuntary.

Most of the studies on career decision making have been carried out in the western developed world, with the United States the most common location. Others have been undertaken in the United Kingdom and in Australia. Harrington (1986) reported on the cross-cultural applicability of Holland's theory of vocational development and the career decision making system, by studying the results of translating this model into Spanish and French and adapting it for use in Canada. Two other studies (Counsell, 1999; Counsell & Popova, 2000) considered the contextual factors influencing careers decision making in Ethiopia and Bulgaria respectively. These studies of decision-making and strategies in a national context drew attention to additional careers strategies adopted by workers in these countries such as politics, ethnic/ tribal affiliations or corruption. In addition to a focus on studies undertaken in the US, the overwhelming majority of studies are on young people making initial decisions, especially school leavers and college students (e.g. Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, & Earl, 2005; Feldman & Whitcomb, 2005; Lee, 2005).

Career decision making is undoubtedly a complex process involving a range of cognitive and affective processes, behaviours, environment and contextual factors, together with individual preferences and beliefs. Findings from the research reported in this article support the established and growing critiques of the traditional matching approach both to ensuring skills supply and to personal career development by providing further evidence of the range of influences and transitioning styles embraced by participants, many of whom demonstrated highly adaptive approaches to progressing their careers. Findings also broaden the scope of knowledge about career decision making of adults working in countries other than the US. Participants in this study were all mid-career adults who were working in three European countries: Denmark, France and Italy.

Career transitioning styles

Where research has been carried out on adults' career decision making, there has often been a particular occupational focus. For example, one study considered how personality and career fit influenced initial medical career aspirations and the extent to which these aspirations were maintained (Antony, 1998). One other study explored the changing world of work, its implications for librarians and their approach to career planning (Blair, 2000). The study presented here draws on a four-fold typology of transitioning styles for adults that emerged from a longitudinal, qualitative research into the effectiveness of career guidance in England that involved 50 individual cases over a period of five years (Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes, 2008). Within this framework the career decision making behaviours of adults was explored jointly by the individual respondent and the researcher/practitioner. This particular typology was chosen because the research from which it evolved was carried out in an European country (England); all the research participants were adults; and occupation was not a sampling requirement. Rather, participants had presented themselves for career guidance support in a range of organisational contexts (that is, adult guidance agencies, further and higher education, unemployment benefit offices or services offered by voluntary or charitable organisations). Some were in work and wanting to change direction. Others were in transition from education into employment, often for the first time. Some of the participants were unemployed and were trying to re-enter the labour market. Irrespective of their particular circumstances, age, or gender characteristic patterns of behaviour were found to recur over time, at the point when they had approached transition points or dealt with crises in their work lives. These 'transitioning styles' relate to the particular ways individuals approached, then dealt with, career and progression issues, with all four styles relevant here: namely the strategic, the evaluative, the aspirational and the opportunistic. Brief descriptions of these styles follow.

Strategic

Representing focused decision making and based on cognitive processing, individuals demonstrating a strategic approach to transition would base their vocational choices on an assessment of options and then formulate plans (sometimes detailed) to achieve a focused goal that maximises the benefits for them. They are committed to 'moving on' and would see their careers as something they actively construct. Typically, they believe that their current position and/or organisational attachment, represents just one phase of a career that could involve relatively frequent changes. They are reconciled to the need to adapt and update their skills, knowledge and understanding constantly. In summary, this strategic approach to career progression is characterised by: a rational appraisal of information as the basis for action; a steadfast focus on a career goal together with a belief in their ability to produce the desired outcomes; a tendency to marginalise emotions and their 'emotional self' in decision making; well-developed problem solving skills, particularly the ability to circumvent difficulties that impede progress; and predisposition to planning and planfulness.

This particular transition style resonates with the 'rational' style of decision making identified from Harren's study of college students (1979). This typified a logical and systematic approach to decisions, where personal responsibility was taken for individual decision making. It was argued that this approach would result in the most effective careers decisions.

Evaluative

An evaluative approach to career progression involves reflective self-appraisal through the identification and evaluation of individual needs, values and abilities. Typically, this style involves: a recurrent and ongoing process of critical self-reflection, based on emotional as well as practical considerations; an identification and evaluation of needs, values and

abilities, which often become drivers; an increased understanding of the longer term consequences of their decisions; and the integration of self-learning in future behaviour.

Tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity is characteristic of this style, because there is always the possibility that the process of critical self-reflection might indicate a different course of action. Over time, individuals espousing an evaluative style are likely to: enhance their self-awareness about their particular skill sets; increase their self-confidence; and start to identify longer-term career goals.

Aspirational

This approach to decision making is characterised by: the tendency to identify vaguely focused, but distant, goals (personal and/ or career); aspiring towards career goals that are often highly competitive and/ or challenging to achieve; a career journey that typically involves (often considerable) material sacrifice; and individual circumstances and priorities that impinge on the overall process – with the heart typically ruling the head. Aspirations may be career or personal and relate to performing, self-employment or any ‘dream’. Those espousing this transitioning style will take almost any job to get by, that is, provide the necessary finance to keep the aspiration alive. Work becomes a means for striving for a distant goal. Interim goals are sometimes, but not necessarily, related to formal employment and achieving their ultimate career goal is definitely a ‘work in progress’. A recent study found that individuals with high levels of aspiration for an ideal occupation were more adaptive, reflecting individuals’ higher self-efficacy. However, it may delay decision-making, especially where aspirations do not reflect ability (Gadassi, Gati, & Wagman-Rolnick, 2013).

Opportunistic

An opportunist transitional style represents a distinctly different approach to career decision making compared with the other styles described above. Opportunists tend to exploit

available opportunities rather than make conscious choices about work. As a consequence, career ideas may appear vague, undecided and uncertain. This style is characterised by: the ability (often preference) to cope with high levels of uncertainty; reluctance to close off options; the use of intuition, rather than rationality, in making decisions (what feels 'right'); a predisposition to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves unexpectedly; resistance (sometimes active) to planning; and an open and flexible approach. Whereas the strategic transitioning style is similar to the 'rational' style proposed by Harren (1979), this transitioning style is similar to the intuitive career decision making style that emerged from the same study. Here, individuals demonstrate a reliance on internal affective states in decision making processes.

Using career decision-making styles in practice

Supporting individual career development effectively will require taking into account an individual's overarching orientation to their career progression and development. Whether strategic and structured, evaluative and reflective, aspirational and hopeful, opportunistic and intuitive or (or indeed combinations of these styles at different times and in different contexts), the individual's preferred style is likely to influence not only the ways in which careers are chosen and therefore develop, but also the ways individuals engage with learning. It is only when this is understood that appropriate help, help that reflects each individual's predisposition, can confidently be offered.

The next section will focus on a discussion of the findings from the study of three countries, along with some reflections on some implications for career policy and practice.

Career transitioning styles of European mid-career workers

Participants in the study reported here came from the larger study of over 120 European citizens living in five member states (Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Spain) that is the focus of this symposium edition. For inclusion in the research study, participants had to be in their mid-20s up to 50 years of age, with no initial qualification higher than European Qualification Framework level 6. In terms of employment history, they had to have experienced at least one significant working or learning transition. Each met, one to one with a researcher allocated to their country, at a mutually agreed venue. These included university offices, the interviewee's own home or some public space. Interviewer and interviewee together explored how they had progressed in their career so far, paying attention to the role of skills acquisition and transfer across occupational sector and life role. The researchers were resolute in keeping their interviewee at the very heart of this process and were therefore mindful of the process of co-construction of the individual narrative (Peavey, 1998). In so doing, their role may be depicted as that of the interlocutor. Each interview was transcribed (into the language of the interview) and analysed against the career-decision making typology described above (Bimrose, Barnes, & Hughes, 2008). Verbatim quotes are presented below, translated from the original language into English. Pseudonyms were allocated and are used here, to ensure anonymity. From this overarching analysis across the entire sample, we present iconic cases which illustrate three of the transitioning styles and the way careers are lived out right now across Europe.

France - strategic career decision-making style

The overall French sample shows Opportunistic decision-making in the minor with only 5 respondents fitting this profile. The rest of the sample was fairly evenly spread across the other styles, namely Evaluative, Aspirational and Strategic. Henri was firmly in this latter

camp, demonstrating the characteristics of the strategist sufficiently for him to be regarded as an iconic case in this regard.

The emotional is almost entirely absent from Henri's story, and the opportunities he has taken advantage of have not come his way by chance, but were to some extent fostered by him. There is little sense of career crisis or setback in this narrative, despite his earliest career plan being completely derailed by something he had not (and indeed could not have) anticipated. Having successfully completed a technology baccalureat, Henri was accepted into officer training at the age of 19. He did very well, particularly in his academic studies which focussed on Maths. A heart murmur was detected and this eliminated the army as a career option: 'Back then, it was difficult. I wanted to be an officer'. He described his next step as 'the huge transition of my life' as he embarked on professional training in optical engineering which, in contrast to a full time university programme, combined bench work with study albeit at degree level. With the characteristic focus of the strategic decision-maker, he moved on to focus on this new career and came to the rational appraisal that in retrospect 'I am happy to have been re-trained'. His optical engineering career progressed well, with increased responsibilities even at his first engineering company, moving from fitter through maker to project manager. He switched company once then a second time, finding he was quickly bored because he didn't have enough projects to manage. In his next job he was the project manager for a re-organisation which outsourced work to India with the direct result of downsizing from 200 to 20 workers on the French site. When interviewed, he was fully aware of the enormity of this task, and described his emotions as:

The most exciting experience in my life...this is exactly what I love. Always working, you never get bored. You've got many projects buzzing around your head. This is the way I like working...if I'm not stressed, I'm not efficient.

It is not that Henri is devoid of emotion; rather he harnesses that emotion in a purposeful way, heading towards a clear goal. The goal, however, does not remain constant. Henri is aware of this and explains:

I am an endlessly dissatisfied person. As soon as I get something I wished for very much, I want something else. I look for challenges.

It is in this regard that Henri has created his own challenges when they were not forthcoming elsewhere; whilst working full time as a manager he set up his own business. Not only did he create a business, but he created the business in order to sell a device he had created for a private client.

I developed a device for a client and set up a small business in order to be able to sell it. Parts are manufactured in Malaysia. I assemble them. I have an office in my attic. This is like a toy for me.

He applies the logic which governs his own career choices to others. So when his wife found it difficult to secure employment, his empathy was expressed in transformative, agentic action:

I said - so, opticians don't want to hire you? You'll see what's gonna happen. I'm going to set up a shop for you.

Which is, of course, exactly what he did. This action, and its underpinning attitude is entirely congruent with the strategist's tendency to apply well developed problem solving skills, thereby getting around real difficulties in career progression.

He readily adopts the mantle of self-made man and is clear that 'I've done everything on my own.' This is characteristic of the strategist, who readily assesses all the options open to them (including those not yet in existence) so as to formulate a plan to achieve a focused goal which should deliver the maximum benefit for them. He is aware of his strengths in this regard:

I know what I am looking for in terms of employment. I want to be head of products, that is mastering technical, development and also trading aspects.

He is equally aware of the drawbacks too:

When I left company X, they offered me head of product. I refused it because I hadn't any experience in production.

So he knows that implementing a focused plan come what may does pay off in terms of achieving goals, but can also cost in terms of missing out on the unplanned opportunities which come off-plan. There is almost nothing in Henri's narrative about a life outside work; that is not in any way to suggest he does not have such a life, only to observe that for the strategist, a discussion about work and career would focus resolutely on just that.

Italy -evaluative career decision-making style

The spread of career decision-making styles among the Italian sample is interesting in that there is a high occurrence of respondents displaying characteristics of more than one decision-making style. In fact, the majority recur in at least two and in some cases three categories. Berta falls predominantly into the evaluative style, to the extent that she can be seen to typify it.

At the time of the interview, Berta was in her early 40s, technically unemployed as a marketing professional. She depicted her situation as a 'self-granted sabbatical' which

absolutely fits with the evaluative style of recurrent and ongoing process of self-reflection, based on emotional as well as practical considerations (Bimrose et al., 2004). Berta had divorced two years earlier and was now in a new relationship, living with her partner and two children. She had moved from a small town in the north to the capital, Rome. This most recent move was prompted in part by her wish to make a new life with her current partner, but also to search out new life and work horizons. Berta's formal learning had been a four year language degree which focused initially on Russian and later on Polish. At different times in her life she had occupied a variety of occupations, ranging from working as an assistant in a publishing house to being a teacher of classical dance. She had settled in a small company, a common employment situation with a small to medium enterprise in regional Italy. The company manufactured furniture and had significant exports, which it was keen to extend. At first, Berta was taken on by the company specifically because she had little technical experience or understanding of marketing in general and furniture in particular. The company was struck by her breadth of education and experience, beyond the technical confines. It was felt that she could provide the necessary 'breath of fresh air' and 'fresh pair of eyes' which would help the company refresh its approach to marketing and exporting. Her language ability, coupled with cultural understanding of the eastern European and Slavic contexts was valued as a way into a hitherto underdeveloped market arena. She found that she was indeed able to generate new solutions to some of the problems the company had been facing, and the company appreciated her as someone who broke the mould. She was in due course offered the post of marketing director, replacing someone whose approach was seen as old fashioned and of limited relevance in the new trading environment. Berta's next step was to undertake formal training in marketing and international trade. Her chosen course had been designed specifically to meet the needs of a small to medium enterprise (SME). It was a relatively lengthy training programme, running to 1,200 hours over two years. At first glance,

it is ironic that someone who was initially employed in part because they came fresh to a role then undergoes sustained training for that role. But Berta's motivation can be seen as entirely congruent with the evaluative career decision style, including as it does a process of self-appraisal to identify the individual's needs, values and abilities. It is by engaging with the marketing role that she can know what she doesn't know and what therefore she needs to know. Berta has taken her learning with her as she has navigated the job market, and has worked more recently as a consultant to SMEs for their marketing and export strategy. Her change of work was entirely bound up with her personal relationships; her relocation enabling her to make a new life with a new partner. Moving jobs, changing career was a fall out of emotional decision-making rather than the other way round. Berta takes an holistic view of her competencies, referring to her experience of learning through the interplay between the cultivation of specific knowledge on the one hand, and interpersonal relationships on the other. This fits well with the evaluative style's characteristic of integrating learning about themselves with future behaviour.

France – aspirational career decision-making style

Where Henri is an iconic strategist taken from the French sample, Eugène, also from the French sample, is equally iconic as an aspirational transition style. In Henri's story, emotional was barely discernible; in Eugène's story, emotion is not only a constant, but the driving force in his life choices, career decisions and transitions.

Eugène depicts himself as a romantic in the sense of being quixotic, imaginative and literary. As a child, he was shy and read voraciously. He 'wanted to be an adventurer; to discover unknown lands and specifically to find precious gems'. He also acts in a romantic way where affairs of the heart are concerned. As a teenager, he circumvented the education system to be with his then girlfriend, who had to leave their small home town to further her

studies. He had already successfully completed his senior high school, passing the baccalaureate in Economics. Taking a second baccalaureate was forbidden unless sanctioned by the highest national authority, namely the Minister of State. Eugène secured the necessary derogation, asserting he needed to take a technical baccalaureate so as to enter engineering. Eugène recounts this simply: 'I didn't go the conventional route – I found my own way.'

Through a curious set of circumstances, Eugène's first job was indeed that of an adventurer. Aged 20, at the invitation of a family friend, he took a job in Africa, harvesting timber in the equatorial rainforest for export: 'It was cutting wood, in the water, with snakes: real Indiana Jones stuff'. There was however an unhappy end to this, his first job; one of his team met with a fatal accident. Eugène recounts 'it turned me upside down; I remember it like it was yesterday.' With not the vaguest career plan, he returned to France and acted on an invitation to get in touch with a plywood manufacturer (an erstwhile customer) who took him on as commercial export attaché.

Unusually for a sales appointment, he was set to work on the factory floor for the first six months. Subsequent work in exports required him to make lots of sales trips to a wide variety of organisations; from the self-employed cabinet maker to large scale furniture production. He rose to be export manager, responsible for half the turnover of the business. His career progressed rapidly: starting with a move from the provinces to Paris; from export manager in plywood to head of export zone for automatic taps to international sales director for luxury-brand lingerie. Both jobs involved a lot of travel; across the emerging Eastern bloc for taps and across the Middle East for lingerie. What propelled these career transitions? 'Sales was never my thing' he confessed and he cautions against equating wages with success: 'I've had top jobs, earned big bucks. But now, I wouldn't call that success'. What propelled him was the collapse of one romance and the strength of another attachment:

My wife left me, taking our child to Paris. My top priority was that I breathe the same air as my son. It was unthinkable that I open the shutters in the morning, see the sky and not see the same sky as my son would see. Therefore I quit my job to follow my boy. I was unhappy, profoundly unhappy.

This is a graphic and heartfelt account of how strong emotions can impel career action. This example of paternal attachment driving a career decision might, on its own, be unconvincing as evidence of the aspirational career transitioning type. Eugène's story continues, and with it comes an uncharacteristic career decision in which the heartfelt is overridden. He is head-hunted into an extremely well paid job as sales director for a multinational company and is installed in a prime location in a prestigious office:

I was very well paid. I had an enormous salary – really, enormous. And for 8 months, I did nothing. I was like a mannequin in a shop window. I drummed my fingers on the table and I was absolutely furious. I wanted nothing to do with it, I wanted to go, but I was trapped. In the end, I asked them to sack me; they let me go. I was angry, really angry.

So much anger, so keenly felt, and even worse:

I was disappointed in myself, for having taken the money. I didn't listen to my own good sense; I listened to the voice of temptation.

For the aspirationalist, trusting instinct and holding on to an aspiration, however vague, is key; it is his own denial of his instincts which is so hard to bear.

The final transition in Eugène's story is from Paris to the heart of the French countryside, to a hamlet with a population in single figures. Remarried and with a blended family, he leaves another high paying job for self-employed consultancy and bucolic bliss:

We'd no money problems at all, both working, both earning well, living in a house we've bought, earning more than our friends. But that's not the point. We want to live well.

A happy ending for this iconic aspirationalist, by listening once more the voice of his heart.

Denmark - opportunistic career decision-making style

The opportunistic style of career decision making was by far the most prevalent of the four styles identified across the Danish sample. Whilst nothing may usefully be drawn from the figures involved, it is illustrative nonetheless to note that while the Evaluative, Strategic and Aspirational styles each accounted for three respondents, 12 respondents made their career decisions in an Opportunistic style. Archetypal among these was Erik.

Erik's career story started as a shipping trainee who progressed to the role of executive manager in an international shipping company which enjoys a strong identity and sense of tradition. Such is the company's reputation that to work for them confers a prestige, the more so at the executive level. Erik is occupying a well-paid role in a well-respected company when it merges with another company; in the ensuing re-organisation, Erik's role is made redundant. At the time of the interview, he feels himself challenged on every front and is highly affected by the stress of his situation. There are practical, everyday challenges of supporting his family, although these are at present under control, thanks to his wife's continued employment and his entitlement to six months on his old full time salary:

One of the hardest things - that's missing the money. My wife earns, she earns a lot. So we're ok, although I earn nothing compared to previously.

There are psychological challenges too, as Erik struggles to make meaning of his situation, and the career possibilities he is now considering. He is considering a complete change of

career, and exploring the possibility of re-training as a green-keeper. But the very act of re-thinking his career is drawing him into an existentialist review of his values and beliefs. He sees himself deep in a career and life crisis and shares his doubts about his own thought processes:

Is it [the change of career] because I think it would be awesome to be a green keeper?
Or is it because by opting for that I avoid some of the things I fear - by working in an office and being a leader or all of the tasks connected to this, because I'm..., I don't know.

He describes the moment when he was required to make some career plans as part of his redundancy package and state support:

Basically, I had a good time being at home, but I couldn't really enjoy it as I liked, not like you enjoy a holiday for a month knowing that you have something to return to. I had to write what my mission and life goals were - which meant I had to get back to work again. That was great - that was awesome. I sat in the living room and looked at the papers, and suddenly I started crying. I just sat there and my eyes filled with tears. My wife sat on the sofa and asked what's wrong? I don't know. I simply cannot contain it.

Erik eventually took up the offer of counselling/coaching; not when it was first offered but later, when he felt he had the necessary energy and was ready to engage with the process. This process drew explicitly on values to help Erik identify his intrinsic motivation. He identified no fewer than 28 points he deemed essential for a 'good' working life; including having a defined working day (as opposed to being in demand 24/7 as in his previous job) and working outdoors. Erik saw this process as a journey, a personal journey, himself the traveller.

Over a period of months, and using his existing networks, he realised this radical shift of career. He undertook vocational training in green keeping and secured an apprenticeship position. He recounted some adverse reactions from golf clubs he contacted to seek employment; assumptions were made that he was too old, would not fit in. Underlying these comments he discerned an assumption that the shift from ‘a big boss in a big company’ to apprentice green keeper wasn’t realistic or feasible. Friends too had mixed reactions, and Erik himself recognises that he has re-cast his own attitudes about roles and work.

The opportunistic career decision-maker is open to career possibilities and flexible in their career path. Although this has not been the case necessarily for Erik up to this point in his career in shipping, it is clear that the opportunity presented by an unexpected turn of events beyond his control (the company merger, re-organisation and his consequent job loss) has given him the opportunity to think afresh. It should be noted that his financial circumstances are a significant part of this opportunity; although the family income is reduced, it is not at a critical or catastrophic point. It is interesting that Erik expresses his career decision as a journey; this aligns with the flexibility in the opportunistic style and its contrast with the rigidity of a plan.

Discussion and Limitations

The four transitioning styles discussed here together provide a tentative framework for making sense of individual behaviours that do not conform to the logical, positivist typologies of career decision making behaviours that have dominated careers theory and practice until recently. As such, it provides a broader and more comprehensive understanding than the established traditional body of research that has informed career practice with its narrow focus relating to a particular cultural context (i.e. the US) and age range (i.e. college

students). However, it should be remembered that the qualitative research study from which this particular typology emerged has all the limitations that are typical of that research tradition. By its very nature, qualitative research is concerned with collecting and analysing information in as many forms, chiefly non-numeric, as possible (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 1996). In common with qualitative investigations generally, the study from which this typology emerged focused on exploring, in as much detail as possible, smaller numbers of cases that were illuminating and aimed to achieve depth of understanding rather than breadth. Consequently, the sample was not representative and therefore findings are not generalisable. Since some of the findings resonate with other research studies into career decision making, it could be argued that the findings are not new. However, precisely because some of the findings validate other research that was carried out independently in other countries and some time ago (e.g. Harren, 1979), it can be argued that this strengthens the claim for the value of the four-fold typology. There is undeniably strong resonance of the transitioning styles with personality features of different clients. Miller and Miller (2005) have recognised this tendency with career decision making styles generally and have sought to develop a theoretical model to relate personality types (as identified by Holland) to decision-making styles. It has also been argued that previous articles relating to career decision making styles have been merely descriptive, offering little insight into why certain styles are adopted or certain decision-making difficulties arise (Chartrand & Rose, 1993). The four transitioning styles provide some insights into why certain difficulties arise, in this respect.

The utility of styles for integration into practice can also be argued. They have been already been integrated into careers education programmes with students in higher educational institutes in the Republic of Ireland and have also been used with Chinese undergraduate students with positive, if qualified, results (Bimrose & Brown, in press).

Conclusions

Career trajectories are influenced by a complex interplay of variables, both internal and external, which are typically mediated by distinctly different transitioning styles. These need to be taken into account by careers practitioners. It would seem that a key question that emerges for careers practice relates to the extent to which current frameworks that guide career practice, with an emphasis on logical, rational decision making, can accommodate, adequately, the varied ways that clients navigate the labour market. Career interventions are not quick and simple, especially with adults. Effective careers guidance aims to support individuals at all stages of their career, to reflect on their skills, consider various options and embrace career change. It needs to ensure that it incorporates research findings, including those relating to transitioning styles, which will enable it to enhance its effectiveness. A substantial evidence base now exists that indicates the positive impact of careers guidance on the working lives of adults. Reshaping careers, learning and identities in response to labour markets in flux is a daunting challenge. Career guidance and counselling can play a major role in helping individuals construct new coherent career narratives, especially when it embraces findings from research and strives to integrate them into practice.

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