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Abstract

This paper argues for a new perspective on guidance and life planning that is informed, but not dominated, by pre-existing Western conceptions of career. Two scholars are highlighted as providing potential foundations for a new approach. Firstly, the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar provides a challenge to the dominant paradigms underpinning the social sciences. Secondly, the capability approach of Amartya Sen provides an alternative to individualistic notions of employability and career management. Whilst the work of Bhaskar and Sen is very different, there are some commonalities. Both are pragmatic, concerned with justice, and allow considerable freedom in the application of their ideas to specific contexts. They have potential for stimulating new approaches to career development pertinent to the needs of rapidly developing economies.

Key words: career guidance, critical realism, capability approach, social justice, freedom; career theory

Introduction

The development of career guidance in South Asia must strike a difficult balance. On the one hand, it can benefit from established Western perspectives, built on a century of thought into career issues, perspectives that have direct relevance to the new Asian middle classes forging careers in a globalised capitalist economy. On the other hand, it must seek a perspective that both embraces the philosophical distinctiveness and diversity of its culture (or cultures), and recognises that millions are still confronted with formidable challenges of poverty, and there is a long journey of economic development to build an inclusive society. This is a fascinating challenge.

This paper suggests two possible foundation stones on which to build a new perspective that may meet this challenge. It focuses on the contribution of two scholars of Indian ethnicity who, working in the UK and USA, have made seminal contributions to international thought. Neither are career development scholars; their work has more fundamental concerns. They certainly do not provide a ready-made model for career development; but their insights might underpin the building of a new perspective. They are Roy Bhaskar and Amartya Sen. I will begin by considering Bhaskar's contribution to the social sciences, and will then consider Sen's contribution to promoting well-being through economic development. I will then discuss their relevance to career guidance and life planning. Finally commonalities between them will be highlighted.

Bhaskar and Critical Realism

Of Indian descent, Roy Bhaskar (1944-2014) was an influential philosopher working in Britain. His works span a wide range of philosophical topics, and like those of many writers of his profession, are in places daunting for the lay reader. Some of his later works explore spiritual aspects of philosophy, and it is here that his writing most explicitly "...aspires to begin to construct a dialogue, bridge and synthesis" (Bhaskar, 2000, p. ix) between Western philosophy and mystical Eastern thought. His work has been made more accessible by Collier (1994) and Sayer (2000). Of most interest are his insights on the philosophy of science (Bhaskar, 1975), and more specifically relevant to us, the philosophy of social sciences (Bhaskar, 1998). Bhaskar is the most influential philosopher in the perspective that has came to be called *critical realism* (although Bhaskar preferred the more specific term *critical naturalism* for his perspective on the social sciences).

The social sciences have tended to divide between two approaches to research and knowledge creation. Traditional approaches to social sciences are often characterised as positivist, borrow approaches from the "hard" sciences and draw heavily on quantitative empirical methods. New paradigm approaches explicit reject the traditional approach in favour of subjectivity and local understandings, and are sometimes characterised as postmodern. Whilst there is a range of nuanced positions that could be adopted within this dichotomy, it is reasonable to characterise this as a division.

Critical realism represents an attempt to reject or even to transcend this dichotomy (e.g., Bhaskar, 2015). One of its key elements is a stress on the difference between epistemology and ontology. It insists that there is a real world that exists objectively. And yet Bhaskar (e.g., 1989) is strongly critical of the transfer of scientific methods to social phenomena which are quite different from natural objects. The social sciences are different. For critical realism, the world and our understanding of it must not be confused. The world is not postmodern; our understandings of it may be postmodern. We can understand reality from different perspectives and at different levels of depth. In the social sciences, we will never achieve a complete understanding of reality. But it is still necessary to conduct ourselves in a way that accepts that there is such a reality. We can accept that knowledge is partial and socially determined, but reject the view that the only reality is a constructed one. If we do not, then we risk developing a world view that is out of touch with our clients' experience. A realist ontology is the fundamental characteristic of critical realism (Bhaskar, 2002/2012).

Nonetheless it adopts an epistemology that is relativist and interpretivist, recognising that knowledge of reality is always partial and local. This is consistent with elements of postmodernism, in that earlier naïve notions of scientific progress are rejected, the sociological determinants of knowledge are recognised, and multiple co-existing explanations are possible (López & Potter, 2001). However, it rejects a strong version of postmodern interpretivism, by taking a pragmatic approach: it is useful to treat objects of study as if they are real. This holds true even of social phenomena which may not be as enduring as natural objects, or exist entirely independently of an agent's conception of their actions (Outhwaite, 1987). Not all explanations may be equivalent in their ability to describe reality, and reality can be understood as complex and stratified, with different depths of explanation possible. Critical realism also rejects the complex linguistic artifice of postmodernism in favour of clarity (López & Potter, 2001).

Critical realism allows use of a diverse range of methods, and approaches to knowledge building, both traditional and new. Methods can be chosen that are appropriate to the questions in hand. It does not require us to adopt an ideology that questions the

existence of an objective reality, a world view that is at odds with the lived experience of our clients. It gives us permission to accept methods, techniques and insights from postmodern approaches, without having to accept its dominance as a perspective on career development.

Sen and the Capability Approach

Amartya Sen is a Nobel prize winning economist and philosopher who was born in India (in West Bengal, his family was from a region in East Bengal which today is part of Bangladesh) in 1933. He has worked in Britain and America since the 1970s. Influenced by early experiences of witnessing famine and civil unrest, Sen's wide-ranging work has encompassed a focus on poverty, inequality and justice (e.g., Sen, 1990; 1992; 2009). He is the originator of the capability approach (e.g., Sen, 1985a & b; 1993). Initially rooted in welfare economics, the capability approach has been adapted for many social science applications.

Sen has been critical of attempts to assess the success of society solely by crude economic measures (such as Gross Domestic Product). There are many factors in the quality of life that are poorly captured by financial measures. He has also been unconvinced by over-reliance on psychological measures of happiness and well-being, because people seem to reconcile themselves to their lot in life. Evidence of moderate levels of happiness is not an argument for tolerating poor conditions and lack of life chances. While both objective economic and subjective psychological measures have a place, neither is fully adequate.

Sen's capability approach offers a way forward. He argues that a very wide range of factors need to be considered when assessing how well life is going, that might include financial or happiness measures, but need to go beyond that. He stresses capabilities – not just the lifestyle a person has achieved already, but the lifestyles that are realistically open

to them to access. The potential for someone to improve their life is a central concern: *to be and to do what they have reason to value*. To have the freedom to implement a lifestyle requires personal agency. Sen's conception of agency is a deeper one than is found in the psychological literature, recognising that individual autonomy can only take place in an economic, educational, legal and political environment that allows it to flourish. It is here that Sen's work on capability connects with his conception of social justice.

This feature is an interesting one. Since the 1990s some career concepts have either explicitly or implicitly elevated the importance of the individual's responsibility for managing their own career and adapting in response to labour market transformation (e.g., Arthur, 1994; Savickas, 2011). In recent years the related notion of "employability" as an attribute the individual must acquire is also very influential (e.g., Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet & Rossier, 2016). Thus, the burden of responsibility may be placed on individuals to shape themselves to employer's requirements, whilst bearing a greater share of economic risk as a result of the growth of insecure employment practices (Robertson & Egdell, in press). This has led to some disquiet that career development practice could be captured by a neo-liberal agenda and policies (e.g., Hooley & Sultana, 2016; Irving & Malik, 2005). In contrast, Sen's conception does not let employers, governments and societies off the hook so easily. Individuals can only flourish in environments which allow them to express their autonomy. For Sen, people are not merely a resource, or means to the end of economic development as some current models of employability and career management skills imply. Rather people are the end of economic development: its purpose is to enable humans to lead flourishing lives. For Sen, economic development means promoting education, promoting human rights, and enabling people to lead lives that they have reason to value.

Applying Bhaskar and Sen to Career Guidance and Life Planning

Critical Realist Career Development

Early approaches to career guidance relied heavily on quantitative psychometric assessment underpinned by a positivist approach to knowledge creation. Bhaskar unambiguously opposes a positivist approach. He argues that the social sciences cannot be neutral; they have embedded values and practical consequences (Bhaskar, 1998b). They are necessarily political. In recent years, it is postmodern and constructivist paradigms that have gained ascendance in the career development literature, reflecting their growth in the social sciences more widely. Advocates of the new paradigm have made claims as to its greater relevance to unstable modern labour markets (e.g., Collin & Watts, 1996; Savickas, 2011).

Consider the narrative approach to career counselling. If a client relates a career narrative, then does this narrative relate to a real world beyond the story? If yes, then we must accept a realist world view. If not, as postmodernism suggests, then we must ask is the career narrative itself real? If the answer to this question is yes then here is the thin end of the wedge – there are some things in the world that are real, and if stories are real, can careers not also be real? If the narratives are not real then there is little point in discussing them and no hope of meaningfully engaging with them or changing them. An irrealist perspective cannot escape this paradox.

Bhaskar (2002/2012) accepts that a postmodern perspective has some advantages in terms of encouraging us to see multiple perspectives, not least multi-cultural ones. Postmodernism also has the commendable feature of highlighting the importance and political nature of language in social affairs. But it is fatally flawed in two key respects. Firstly, the postmodern claim that there is no reality leads inevitably to logical inconsistencies that cannot be resolved. In Bhaskar's terms, postmodernism is guilty of an epistemic fallacy: blurring the distinction between epistemology and ontology, whilst privileging the former over the latter. The importance of this distinction is rarely recognised by career scholars, with the notable exception of Pryor and Bright (e.g. 2007). This does not mean there are no unresolved question marks about what constitutes a "real" object in the social sciences in general (Archer, 1998) and in career development in particular. This remains challenging, particularly when dealing with subjective careers. The mirror image of the epistemic fallacy is the ontic fallacy: the false notion that there can be an unmediated understanding of being and reality (Hostettler & Norrie, 2003). Bhaskar is unambiguously clear that he also rejects this position, which is more commonly found in traditional quantitative social sciences. Secondly, postmodernism gives no basis for identifying one viewpoint as better than another. This position is of little pragmatic value to practitioners who must choose an approach to intervene in their client's lives.

A Capability Approach to Career Development

Turning again to Amartya Sen's ideas, the author (Robertson, 2014; Robertson & Egdell, in press) has made initial attempts to apply the capability approach to career development, and others are also exploring this perspective (e.g., Galliott & Graham, 2014; Picard, Olympio, Masdonati, & Bangali, 2015; Skovhus, 2016). For the most part, this work has sought to explain career experiences through the lens of the capability approach, or to operationalise the approach for a career development context. There is some work still to be done before it will be ready to inform the design of career interventions, and provide an evaluative framework. This might involve developing a list of capabilities that might be useful for application to career guidance and life planning. This is a problematic activity for a number of reasons. There is no single correct way of doing this. There is as yet no empirical basis for such a list. Nonetheless, providing some sort of structure to think

about career capabilities is necessary as it could a number of aspects of careers work, specifically:

- To set out the range and scope of objectives of career guidance
- To provide an overarching framework for career assessment
- To define areas for focus in career interventions
- To identify areas for outcome evaluations

There are difficulties in conceptually separating Sen's notions of resources, conversion factors, capabilities and functionings. The concepts are multi-level and not exclusively an attribute of the individual. Indeed, there is here an explicit rejection of the individualist manifestation of employability. Whilst thinking of capabilities as individual will remain important in career work, capabilities can also be understood at a macro level (e.g., impact of government policy, economic markets) and at intermediate levels (e.g., local institutions and social structures). In practice, the difference is a subtle one, but nonetheless important. Career capabilities can be understood at multiple levels of analysis, and this is one (but not the only) facet of Bhaskar's notion of the stratified nature of reality (Collier, 1998).

Conclusion

Bhaskar and Sen provide very different insights, and at first glance appear to have little in common. Yet there are common threads. Both draw on philosophy but have strong non-Western influences on their thinking. Neither could be accused of being postmodernist. Both are deeply concerned with issues of freedom (e.g., Bhaskar, 2002/2012; Sen, 2001). Both present frameworks of thought that allow considerable room for

manoeuvre in their application to local problems. Both provide abstract thinking, but in a manner that is both pragmatic and flexible. Both permit a wide range of approaches – they provide a sound conceptual foundation, but leave great space for creativity in their application to real life problems. This makes them valuable to career development thinkers. For example, Bhaskar (e.g., 2015) sets out not to *do* social science but to provide a secure philosophical foundation for it, a task he calls "underlabouring".

There is another, more subtle similarity. Both writers express an interest not just in actualities, but also in possibilities. Sen's notion of capabilities means assessing well-being in terms of the possible future lives that are realistically attainable. For Bhaskar, "critical realism asserts the absolute priority of the possible over the actual. The possible is ontologically, epistemologically and logically prior to the actual, and the possible is real" (Bhaskar, 2002/2012, p. 55).

Bhaskar's critical realism transcends the divide between traditional and new paradigm social sciences. Sen provides a broad-brush way of understanding the promotion of well-being that makes sense both at an individual level and also at the level of government policy for economic development. They find ways to reconcile apparent opposites. Thus, new approaches to career guidance and development do not need to follow the fashions or dominant discourses in Western academia. A fresh and distinctive approach may emerge from drawing on Indian thinkers. Doing this may help us to question the underpinning assumptions of career development, and to develop creative new approaches.

About the author

Dr Pete Robertson is a qualified career adviser and psychologist. He practiced as a career adviser in the South of England, supporting school leavers with disabilities. Since 2001 he has worked at Edinburgh Napier University in Scotland. He is an Associate Professor, and leads the University's postgraduate career guidance programmes.

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