

Becoming aware of taken for granted attitudes and prejudices: A pilot study of Information, Advice and Guidance Practitioners

Liz Bradley

Introduction

This article reports on the early stages of my empirical research. It explores how the enquiry developed through doubts in my own practice as an Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) practitioner working outreach in East Lancashire. My early enquiry has developed out of emerging critical insights on my own 'whiteness' and further my 'taken for granted' attitudes. This resulted in the discovery of my 'own reflexive voice' which was captured in narrative, an example of which is included within this article. The research has been informed by theories on 'whiteness' and 'taken for grantedness'. The research also considers possible limitations of some current careers guidance training, which could mean that some practitioners never reflect critically on their own taken for grantedness. It is suggested that if they were to engage in this deeper level of critical reflection, then they may develop a better understanding of the different world-views of their clients.

Background

In 2005 I gained employment with a national charity that provides opportunities for people who are disadvantaged in the labour market. My role was to develop and deliver a new project in East Lancashire; the project was to engage with people over twenty five who were not claiming any state benefits. Many of the clients needed support to overcome barriers and return to work or education, hence the need to provide careers guidance and advice on how to gain qualifications, skills, experience or employment.

The majority of clients who met the criteria for inclusion in the project were not from white backgrounds. The biggest single group were women of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian heritage. I developed strong relationships with a

number of women and the insights this gave me became the foundation of my epistemology. I began to question whether the government's Every Child Matter (ECM) policy (DfES, 2003, 2004), especially the Youth Matters section relating to Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) would reach or benefit those who were Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET), and more so those who were from ethnic groups, especially young women. Since working with the women, I had seen first hand some of the barriers they faced, expectations of not only family, but in addition the conceptions held by other practitioners. I became concerned that the policies may not fit their experience, and this caused dissonance in my practice.

I began to question further how this policy was going to make any difference to the lives of Asian women in East Lancashire. Until this point my PhD research was focused on the effects or outcomes of the ECM agenda, but I started to engage in critical reflection and gained a greater emphasis on the dissonance between what happens at the 'grass roots' level and what is decided at government level.

The research journey: how my experience as a researcher shaped the research

In this section, I will use narrative excerpts – both my own and those of others with whom I have interacted in the course of this work – to illustrate and explain the development of my thinking and understanding which have shaped this research.

The Asian women who confided in me, my consciousness of being a white woman, and working as a Personal Development Adviser within the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) community, formed the springboard for my first narrative. This narrative will provide insight into one of many experiences in East Lancashire. Before I recall my narrative, I present a pen picture in order to contextualise the narratives and provide supplementary information. The pen picture will give some background to Shahida, and the situation in which she and I found ourselves¹.

Throughout this document these sections are indented and can be further identified by the use of italic font. (A fuller description and discussion of the use of pen pictures will be given in the final thesis). Sections of text placed within

¹ Within this story I have changed the names of the individuals and the places where we met to protect their identity

a box are my own critical insights. Speech boxes (inspired by McLeod, 2008) are used to represent the voices of those who have contributed to the early cycles of this research.

Pen portraits: Shahida and Liz

Shahida (25), born in Pakistan, came to England twelve months prior to our meeting, she had come with her husband, he was here as part of his professional development, they had been granted entry to the UK for two years and once he had completed his training they were to return to Pakistan. She had been educated to university level in her own country. She had been married for six years and had two small children, however back at home they lived within a family structure, where she had spent little time with her husband, and they were rarely allowed to make decisions for themselves or their children. We had been meeting for months, and as our relationship developed we had shared aspects of each others lives; family, husband and tales of children. I enjoyed meeting with Shahida, she was very likeable, and she had an inner glow, and seemed to radiate this.

Liz (44), born in Liverpool, 'white', my parents had both worked since about the age of fourteen and classed themselves as working class. We lived on a council estate, in a council house, in an area of Liverpool that was predominately 'white'. During my teen years, the estate was subject to high unemployment, and drug misuse. At the age of eighteen, I moved to Preston, Lancashire to undertake a Degree (I was the first in my family to do so). Later I married, had two children, I returned to education at the age of 39, gaining a Certificate in Education, followed by a degree. Shortly after this, I obtained employment with a national charity, working in East Lancashire.

Narrative: The beginning of my understanding...

I sat in the same old run down room in the local Community Centre where I had worked for the past few months. I had already seen a few of the women who I met there regularly that day. I remember thinking Shahida is coming soon and how I was looking forward to seeing her, to hear her progress and what steps she would take next to forward her career development.

She arrived as usual; it was nice to see her, I was eager to see her. Since we had been working together she had attended some of the one day courses I had organised in the Community Centre. I had seen how she had changed, developed and grown in confidence; from this we had worked together to secure work experience. She really wanted to work with children, and we managed to arrange for her to do voluntary work both in a nursery, at a local after school club and with a school. This time my expectation was that we would look at the next steps, possibly some paid employment; however I couldn't have been more wrong.

She came into the normal room and sat down. I remember thinking she did not seem her usual self, and I could see by the expression on her face something was concerning her. We started with our normal catch up, and then she said '*...it has been decided that I have to go back to Pakistan....*' it wasn't her choice to return and she was concerned. She went on to tell me how whilst in Pakistan she had also experienced what she described as cruelty from her husband's Grandmother. She was frightened of returning back to a time and place, in the past, as since leaving both her and her husband had experienced different lives in the UK. She spoke about how people here were nice, I remember feeling conscious of our differences, or was it me feeling uneasy about how I could or should respond? I was conscious that here I was, a white western woman, brought up in different surroundings with different values and beliefs. I inwardly acknowledged the difference in my response to her; in other words, how different would my response be if I were talking to one of my peers?

'I remember struggling with the conversation; all the time we talked I was conscious of trying to keep the conversation on track. My mind shouting out, don't go, talk to your husband explain your feelings; ask him to stand by you.'

However, I managed to keep the conversation on track and we discussed the reasons for her feelings. I was conscious of my power at this point, and on reflection realise that partly my response originated from the professional part of my being. After we had met, I continued to run through parts of our conversation; in my mind's eye, reflecting in that 'personal space' on the interview. On returning home, the events of the day re-played in my mind, and I recalled how powerless and moved I had felt that day.

'Should I have said anything different, could I have said to her the things that were going round my mind? Would it have made any difference to the situation for her, did I say what she expected, did she want the response that was in my mind?'

During this research I have kept a journal. This has helped me to become a critical IAG practitioner, reflecting on past experiences and going deeper to gain greater understanding. Because of this journey I was able to openly question my practice and became more conscious that here I was, a white western woman, living in a western world. This critical reflection highlighted a previously unconscious awareness of my possible power and authority. This consciousness assisted further questioning and through the narrative inquiry I started to see a new 'way of knowing' (Ely *et al.*; 1999: 64). This was where my research took on a whole new cycle; the insights from reflection led to deeper understanding. The research was being shaped by my own self critical insights, so I began to question how I as a white western woman could

provide careers guidance to individuals from different ethnic groups, without having any knowledge or thought of how my whiteness, and lack of multi-cultural awareness, may affect our working relationship.

This consciousness of my own power and authority, acted as a catalyst, which then assisted my realisation of a possible problem in practice. On reviewing the literature, I encountered Pearce (2003), who questioned whether practitioners could be aware of how their ethnicity might affect their practice. This contributed to my questioning, I was granted ethical approval for my research, and subsequently met with a number of outreach IAG practitioners.

On discussing my research one IAG practitioner commented:

'My practice in the past with ethnic women may have done them an injustice and I may indeed have worked with these individuals using my own belief systems, instead of theirs.'

This reinforced my questioning, as her comments echoed my original concerns, helping to validate my research. She had been a practitioner for many years; however, it had taken recent higher level study and further enquiry for her to gain this insight into her practice. This was a 'eureka' moment. I mentally acknowledged that my colleague's statement might reflect what can happen when 'white' individuals work with people from different ethnic groups. At this point I was also reading Thompson (2003), who discusses the concept of 'taken for grantedness', and defines this as 'to see the world from within the narrow confines of one culture, to project one set of norms and values on to other groups of people' (p.16). This had a great impact on me and has become the key concept within this research. I reflected on my IAG colleagues' comments; that some practitioners may have little or no thought for how their own taken for granted assumed power, or 'whiteness', may blind them to how they interact across cultural, ethnic, class, disability and gender differences. At this point I think it is important to explain what is meant by the term *whiteness*? Jay (2005), discusses this concept and says that it is 'not an attack on people' (np). He says studying this helps people think critically how whiteness 'has operated systematically, structurally, and sometimes unconsciously as a dominant force' (np). McIntosh (1988) adds to this and discusses how in western society white people are privileged and benefit from an 'unearned advantage and conferred dominance' (p. 7). Thompson (2003) comments how, 'Routinized social practices are strongly influenced by, and channelled through, dominant norms and cultural patterns and therefore reflect the status quo' (p.36).

My research started to focus on IAG practitioners, who may have never questioned this element of their practice. Therefore, there is a need to help other professionals realise their unconsciousness, their lack of criticality, of

themselves, where they practice and the wider political setting. In a process of becoming critical, practitioners could then use their new understanding to improve and transform practice.

Standards, qualifications and frameworks in IAG

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Quality Standards for Young People's Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)(2007a) and the supporting Quality Standards for Young People User Guide (2007b), have been developed to assist organizations in their delivery of IAG. Standard five of the guide outlines evidence indicators for 'promoting equal opportunity, celebrating diversity and challenging stereotypes' (p.19). On studying this further questions arose, as they outline that staff should be understanding and sensitive to service users' faith. How do service providers intend to do this when their staff may be unaware of their taken for granted practices? There is a need for practitioners and the services providers to go through a dialectic process enabling deeper understanding. By utilising both dialogue and reflection more connections could be made that would result in a more critical consciousness. Carr and Kemmis (1986) discuss that, 'Consciousness arises out of and is shaped by practice and in turn is judged in and by practice' (p.161). By reflecting on this, we can examine how practice is affected by outside forces. During this process, potential barriers may be identified, and this can enable practitioners to help people they support through Information, Advice and Guidance to break through discrimination and gain their rightful place in society. Despite the fact that careers guidance is seen as a necessary and important step, we find that the Labour government has implemented a change of focus for the Careers Services. Watts (2003) says that this has resulted in 'a legal entitlement to impartial Careers Advice and Guidance by skilled people (is) being lost' (p.1) and that there has been an 'erosion of professional standards' (p.1).

Therefore I turned to the current literature in relation to the ongoing debate about IAG qualifications and competencies. From my initial research in this area there is much discussion with regards to the correct qualification level needed to be a practitioner. The last qualification that had widespread recognition was The Diploma in Careers Guidance, this was in the 1990s, however since then this qualification has been replaced by The Qualification in Careers Guidance (QCG). However the QCG 'has been widely criticised for its lack of an applied (practical) dimension' (McGowan *et al.*, 2009: 29) and in addition to this practitioners are also required to undertake NVQ Level 4 in Guidance. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) report (2009) outlines the existing United Kingdom framework for training of practitioners. They too refer to the NVQs and note that the standards have undergone many revisions since they were first developed in the 1990s (p.69). However, NVQs have also been 'widely acknowledged as failing to provide

practitioners with an understanding of underpinning theory and so as inhibiting the development of practice' (McGowan *et al.*; 2009: 29).

The purpose of the Cedefop research (2009) was to review trends and patterns in training provision for career guidance practitioners and to develop a common competence framework for career guidance practitioners in the European Union (EU). The report discusses how guidance is delivered in diverse settings and how some competences are 'transversal', saying 'that they encompass an ability or understanding that cuts across all the specific activities through which clients might be supported in developing and learning to manage their careers' (p.69). The report extends this further and states these type of transversal competences, which are also termed as foundation competences, are characterised by the fact that they are not work tasks, but underpin and cross-cut all work tasks. It is acknowledged that both the service user and the practitioner bring their own social, cultural, economic and personal circumstances and personal values and attitudes to the process. However the report also notes that the competence framework can only stress the importance of the personal philosophies and world-views of the career guidance practitioner. Furthermore it is stressed that:

Each career guidance practitioner needs to develop high levels of personal reflectiveness; this is indicated in the foundation competence on clients' diverse needs. The brevity of description of the competence framework does not allow extended exploration of these issues, but they are extremely important in applying the framework to particular situations of career guidance work.

(Cedefop, 2009: 71)

Developing and refining the research

As discussed earlier, several factors led me to revisit my original research and it became clear that the underlying issues affecting successful policy outcomes were highly complex and often far removed from the daily concerns of the people working on the frontline as IAG practitioners. Along the journey of becoming more self critical, my research developed to question 'How do practitioners gain awareness of their taken for granted attitudes, assumptions and prejudices?' Furthermore, how does this awareness relate to their appreciating and understanding of difference (between self and clients, self and other IAG practitioners)?

The next stage of the research is to gain deeper understanding of the process of becoming aware of our taken for granted assumptions. Then, armed with this understanding, the intention is to co-research a wider purposive sample of NVQ IAG practitioners who at that point may not have verbalised their taken for granted assumptions. I further anticipate that if my hypothesis is

correct, and some practitioners are unaware of their assumptions, their awareness could be improved by the development of a reflective model which could assist IAG practitioners to gain fuller awareness of the different world views they and their clients hold.

References

Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming Critical. Education, knowledge and action research*. Lewes: Falmer.

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007a). *Quality Standards for Young People's Information, Advice and Guidance*. (Online). Available from: <http://www.cegnet.co.uk/content/default.asp?PageId=2440> [Accessed on 30th November 30 2008].

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007b). *Quality Standards for Young People's User Guide 2007*. (Online). Available from: <http://www.cegnet.co.uk/content/default.asp?PageId=2440> [Accessed on 30th November 2008].

Department for Education and Skills (2003). *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*. (Online). Available from: <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk> [Accessed on 30th August 2006].

Department for Education and Skills (2004). *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*. (Online). Available from: <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/files/F9E3F941DC8D4580539EE4C743E9371D.pdf> [Accessed on October 29th 2007].

Ely, M., Vinz, R., Downing, M. & Anzul, M. (1999). *On Writing Qualitative Research: Living by Words*. London: The Falmer Press.

Jay, G. (2005). *Introduction to Whiteness*. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Studies (Online). Available from <http://www.uwm.edu/~gjay/Whiteness> [Accessed November 9th 2008].

McGowan, A., Watts, A.G. and Andrews, D. (2009). *Local Variations: A Follow-Up Study of New Arrangements for Connexions/Careers/IAG Services for Young People in England*. (Online). Available from: http://www.cfbt.com/evidenceforeducation/what_we_offer/resources/research_papers/local_variations.aspx

McIntosh, P. (1988). *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work*. Working Paper 189 Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.

McLeod, A. (2008). *Listening to Children: A practitioners Guide*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Pearce, S. (2003). Compiling the White Inventory: the practice of whiteness in a British primary school. *Cambridge Journal of Education*. Vol. 33, No 2, 273-288.

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) (2009). *Professionalising career guidance, Practitioner competences and qualification routes in Europe*. (Online). Available from: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/SSsearch/default.asp> [Accessed on 23rd August 2009].

Thompson, N. (2003). *Promoting Equality: Challenging discrimination and oppression*. Second edition. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Watts, A.G. (2003). Model Guidance Systems. *The Times Education Supplement*, 14 Nov.

For correspondence

Elizabeth Bradley is a careers adviser for disabled students and graduates at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN). She is a graduate of the Professional Development in Education programme at the University of Bolton and is now registered for a part-time PhD at the University of Cumbria. She can be contacted at: sefbrad@cumbria.ac.uk