conclusion - help for personal advisers

is there anything there?

The system orientation study was replicated, not too long after publication, in New Zealand (Munro, et al, 1983). In that later study the findings from the SOI and ITT were broadly confirmed, and similar clusters of attitude found in a factor analysis of the 48 SOI and TII items. There was, however, no attempt to correlate these scales with other variables.

Much more recently, a case for re-examining the significance of system orientation for Connexions has been set out in Law (2000).

But, in the long intervening period the SOI has attracted little attention. That may, of course, be because counsellors find it of little use. But use for what? Counselling literature is strong on examining client groups, counsellor qualities, and theoretical explanations. All of this is useful to personal advisers - on how to do their face-to-face work. But it does not much help them to develop a role, as part of the structure-and-development of an organisation. That would mean setting their work in its institutional and community context - that bureaucracy and its network. It is important to visualise counselling in this social and institutional context. This enquiry is useful for that purpose.

The SOI-TII scales and their results are not mere statistical artefacts, but a record of people responding to issues. Furthermore, those responses are patterned – there are trends, with a discernible shape. Moreover, that pattern has a sharpness way beyond what could have occurred by chance: measures of reliability - in both the original and replication studies - demonstrate this. Reification is the sociological sin of talking-up concepts having no observed correspondence with reality – of using convenient ideas as facts. The reliability data say there is no reification here.

This being so, system orientation is an important reality, significant for the future development of counselling and advisory work.

an orientation to what?

So, if something really is going on, what is it - what does the pattern show? Item content on the SOI (pages 19-20) says that it shows the degree to which the counsellor or adviser is prepared to legitimate the requirements of the institution. An institution's expectations are, of course, strong influences on what its people do. And its bureaucracy is necessary, indeed it provides the means which make their work possible. So we can expect some predisposition to be loyal among our 398 counsellors.

But there is something else. Some of the 398 were prepared to give serious consideration to other ways of thinking about how they do their work. Whatever else low system orientation might prove to be, it is not unconditionally in favour of the maintenance of any status quo. And, in order to sustain this position, low system-oriented counsellors need to be able to maintain some independence of mind in relation to the system. Its

requirements, its blandishments, its enticements - and maybe even its threats – are not all that matter to them

To risk an evolutionary analogy* - we could say that, if the system is the so-far successful 'winner' in the ecological game, then the alternative is the speculative, hopeful and risk-taking 'mutant'. And - although it is usually forgotten by social Darwinists - survival to next-year needs both this-year's winners and its mutants. In this ecology, the low system-oriented need the high system-oriented - to sustain the framework; but the high system-oriented need the low system-oriented - to recognise and articulate alternatives. Survival in fast-changing environments always depend on such adaptations. Exact generation-on-generation replication is, in nature, a dead end.

Characterisations of - on the one hand - 'loyalty', and - on the other - 'independence', are attractive ways of describing the positions mapped by SOI. But any institution can be infused with more than one kind of system. Its alternatives might be independence of mind; but, as we shall see, they might be a disposition to favour of another kind of system.

In any event, this must not become a game of 'heroes' and 'villains'. We are talking, rather, about a characterisation of dispositions - towards the institution, and to the learners in it.

Some of the dispositions which constitute system orientation are to be found, now, in the policy roots of Connexions (Law, 2003a). Ruth Levitas (1998) has shown how such dispositions reflect the interests of political and economic constituencies in society-at-large. Those interests can, for example, favour 'employable skills', 'career interests' and 'social acceptability' - as key elements for learning outcomes. An adviser - finding that such talk would not represent anything useful (or even unattainable) to a learner, might, instead, want to know about 'disappointments', 'anxieties' and 'allegiances' - as a bases for understanding what is going on, and what can be done about it. But the dominant approach can too-easily sideline the useful one.

Economic and political constituencies seek to get their positions embedded in the organisation of careers work and Connexions. There is nothing wrong with this, it is what they are supposed to do. But where they become dominant, their underpinning assumptions and values become part of the system. Then and now.

Advisers need to be clear, therefore, about the extent to which these dispositions can be legitimated, and about the implications of their acceptance and rejection. Those implications apply, as they do in SOI, to both what the institution can reasonably expect of advisers, and what advisers can reasonably offer learners. They also apply to what cannot be reasonably expected or offered.

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* I think the analogy works. But I take seriously Steve Jones's warning: 'Evolution is to analogy what statues are to birdshit!'.

Such socially-rooted and potentially conflict-laden issues do not crop up a lot in the literature of face-to-face help. Until, that is, Helen Colley, gave the SOI study some attention in her examination of mentoring (Colley, 2003).

why now?

Helen Colley is right to set mentoring in its social and community context. Paul Halmos's (1965) might have discouraged her, with his view of counselling as post-political. But, any offer of help raises questions about the terms in which help is offered - on whose behalf, with whose support, and with consequences for whom. And where any conflict leads to playing for position in an institutional and community setting, then the word 'political' is not inappropriate. That is why Maurice North (1972) pointed to the impossibility of taking an attitude to a client needs, without also taking an attitude to the politics of the system in which the need arose. To look for an amelioration of need wholly in the inner life of the client, is to fail to look for other significant causes of what is going wrong.

High system orientation means that the dominant interests - in the institution and its community - are assumed to be legitimate, perhaps benign. If this so, then acting in compliance with this system will always be justified, because it will benefit all (or most) and penalise nobody (or few). But, in all organisations, an alternative point-of-view is at least a possibility. For example, in Connexions a low system-oriented position might evoke conflicts concerning whose professional training and experience is useful, what theory and research should be taken into account, what targets are to be regarded as worth pursuing and how resources are most fairly to be allocated.

Considerations like these influence what advisers do. They may influence who else in the network is brought in to help, what kind of information is introduced, or how much time is offered. If this happens only in response to dominant interests, claims to ethical commitments to impartiality become impossible to defend. For example, in thinking about information - and assuming, for the moment, that there is such a thing as neutral information - if an adviser selects information on the basis of whether it helps the company to reach its targets, and shapes what is said to maintain that focus, then the mere 'neutrality' of the information is - at best - a weak defence of the ethics.

Advisers who reflect on this will, in a manner exactly analogous to the findings of the original study, experience conflict - inside themselves and with other people. And those conflicts may well evoke challenges to what the system expects.

All of this makes a difference to the way helping roles are conceived. Take, for example, characterisations of the role of the personal adviser as, not 'advocate', but for enabling 'self-advocacy'. That puts a boundary around the advisory role - 'don't expect too much of me'. But, in a social context, any role conception has consequences for reciprocal roles. And a boundary which excludes 'advocate' leaves the client, not in the role of 'self advocate', but in the much weaker role of 'supplicant'. In an institutionalised and politicised system, it is unrealistic to expect always successfully to assert their own needs and

interests. Boundary maintenance is all well and good, unless – that is - the most influential and powerful influences on life chances turn out to be outside the boundaries of a helping relationship. In that case avoidance of the role of advocate would be a high system-oriented cop-out. That is why Musgrove and Taylor (1969) characterise the role of the counsellor as one in which clients are 'cooled out' - to the point where they learn to accept the unacceptable. The issue of advocacy is, of course, more complicated than this; but low system orientation would characterise helpers who see part of their role as advocating needed system change on behalf of vulnerable groups.

A culture of individualism has - for several years since 1979, when the Thatcher-agenda first got its chance - comfortably accommodated this narrowly-bounded role conception of help. We have since re-learned that, not only is there a society, there are - within society – systems; and systems can be harmful. This is not structural determinism; it is an acknowledgement of the impact of social structures on what people do. The acknowledgement is changing the terms in which help is conceived. Policy is shifting to 'being tough' - both on individual career, and on the social causes of career. Connexions is part of this shift.

Chapters three and four draw on ideas about social and educational change set out by Émile Durkheim and Basil Bernstein. Both look for 'open' and 'organic' bases for action, as alternatives to 'mechanical' and tightly 'framed-and-classified' ones. But, more than that, ideas about system orientation open doors to understanding how a personal adviser's role conception contributes to organisational and community change. Both Durkheim and Bernstein make much of how roles are 'achieved' by the role occupant as well as 'assigned' by the system. The capacity to reconceive a role is part of the low-system-oriented dynamics of organisational change and of how the organisation responds to change in the community*.

But the stakes can be high. Like social workers, teachers and personal advisers are thought of as roles which can be expected to deliver on antisocial behaviour, political apathy, low levels of employability, lack of motivation at school and falling educational standards. And, where conflicts crop up, the situation heats up. Some helpers, who have been perceived to act against such systemic pressures, have been penalised – in some UK helping systems some have been gaoled.

local scope for personal advisers

Although the study is about bringing about change, it would be misleading to characterise it as a tool for social engineering. All of the issues raised by system orientation can only be resolved locally – in the context of what a personal adviser can see is 'my' role, at 'this' organisation, in 'our' community.

* Ideas abut the relationship between roles, role-conception, role-expectation and various forms of role-conflict are more fully developed in the original report than in the articles published in the British Journal of Guidance and Counselling - see Bill Law (1977).

Constituency-driven policy for careers work and Connexions does have a social-engineering component. But an adviser's disposition to those values and assumptions – whether in support or opposition – should be locally-rooted not centrally-compliant.

Thinking about the system and its alternatives means, among other things, thinking about who else is involved in careers work, and on what terms. It therefore concerns all kinds of people:

- organisational policy-makers - and accountability;
- recruiters - and employability;
- institutional managers - and the stability of the organisation;

- colleagues - and their professionalism;
- clients' families - and their engagement;
- professional support - and its theory;

- informal associations - and their concerns;
- one's self as a helper - and my values and needs;
- the client - and what he or she expresses.

In political terms these are constituency interests. But in other terms they are stakeholders. It is with this latter meaning that they occur in the SOI and TII scales.

Those scales suggest that identification with upper part of the list tends to exclude identification with lower part; that high system orientation values a status quo; and that low system orientation is looking for an alternative.

But system orientation (both high and low) are relative concepts. As the system changes, what are conceived as its alternatives will also change*. Indeed some managers might look upon the appointment of low-system-oriented advisers as a way of achieving change - where, that is, the manager can see the need for change**.

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* A contemporary version of the SOI should base items on community contacts as well as organisational ones. It should also discriminate between emerging theory and established theory. And it should acknowledge what is now the greater visibility of policy in the work.

** Part of my own participant observation suggests this. I was appointed full-time school counsellor to a Grammar school in process of becoming a Senior High (comprehensive) school. The head, whom I found an unusually thoughtful man, saw my appointment as one of the ways in which he wanted to accommodate respond to the stresses that this change would mean. There were stresses, not the least of which involved the headteacher of the single feeder Junior High School, in which I also worked - see Bill Law (2003b).

There is no simple implication here that low system orientation is always 'right', or even that advisers should be selected on the basis of their scores on the SOI scale. But there are implications: in offering help to personal advisers we are going to need management, training and support programmes which help with all of the following:

- responsiveness to change;
- stakeholder interests;

- topics of conflict;
- experience of conflict;
- tolerance of conflict;

- managing plurality;
- levels of intervention;

- selection of advisers;
- self selection of advisers;
- team building.

Not all advisers would need help on all of these issues. But anyone with programme-managing roles – developing the team, supporting colleagues and partners, keeping people engaged – will be able to use help with all of these matters. They pose big questions for the length and depth of staff development, and for the way it is located and interleaved with experience*.

But all of this will need to be worked out differently in different localities – with different stakeholders, different conditions, and different needs.

The study was written up in 1977, and so the citations stop there. But that earlier literature is still significant and relevant. It asks searching questions about whether - with what safeguards, in what circumstances and with what likely effects - a counsellor has any right to get involved in other people's lives. They are good questions and they can be transposed directly into the work of personal advisers. Picking up on them in this study poses questions about how that work is located in its institution, and community and how it is managed and supported. It is a discourse which badly needs to be restarted.

And it is a discourse which poses serious challenges for the contemporary research agenda - on both careers work and Connexions.

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* A model for training based on the findings on pages 56-58 suggested that training and support should be spread over time, and interleaved with periods of practice. The model was implemented in a Careers Research and Advisory Centre programme, which ran for several years in various parts of the UK, called 'Learning for a Changing World'.

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