**Socratic dialogue and careers**

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by Kevin Morrell

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Socratic Dialogue and Careers

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Socratic Dialogue and Careers

Abstract

This paper outlines a technique for enhancing the effectiveness of careers thinking by identifying and challenging tacit beliefs about career success. These beliefs can be understood as social scripts, i.e. cognitive structures that simplify common decision scenarios. An important contribution of careers counselling is to enable clients to recognise tacit beliefs and assumptions that limit the effectiveness of their careers thinking. In the process, this often involves finding problems. This paper outlines how an archetypal problem finding technique – Socratic inquiry – can be adapted and applied in this particular context. Socratic inquiry can enable identification of social scripts which are a source of limiting assumptions. It can also enable cross-examination of these assumptions, and enhance the facility for internal dialogue.

Introduction

Changes in the nature of organizations, and in the way we work, have implications for how we understand the relationship between individual employees and their employers (Sennet, 1998). The decline of traditional organizational forms (Arnold, 1997a; Kanter, 1989), and shift in established patterns of employment (Templar and Cawsey, 1999) together invalidate received constructions of the successful career as progress in organizational ‘space’ (Collins, 2000). Change in the social contract and the decline of organizational hierarchies also problematises extant models for career guidance (King, 2001; Collin and Watts, 1996). The work context has become more complicated and so traditional routes to success (e.g. Gould, 1984) are harder to
realise. Consequently, individuals face greater uncertainty both in managing their careers, and in making sense of their career choices (Cohen, 2001). As well as these issues creating problems for individuals in terms of their career choices, they present problems for organizations, for whom managing and retaining valuable employees can prove difficult (Dess and Shaw, 2001).

There is some doubt as to the extent to which the traditional career is dead (Guest and MacKenzie Davey, 1996). Also, it may be unhelpful to introduce dichotomies between new and old ways of managing career (Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Cohen, 2001), since other social structures, such as class, race and gender may prove relatively intransigent (Wilson, 1999). Nonetheless, there is a consensus that traditional ways of understanding career are outdated in at least some contexts (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hutton, 1995; Sennett, 1998), and that consequently there is a need for greater diversity in thinking about career counselling (Watts, 1996).

Enhancing effective thinking about career can positively influence individual development and well-being in a variety of ways (Arnold, 1997a; Iles and Mabey, 1993). These benefits can be realised whatever the specific organizational context for an individual’s career. Different theorists suggest that guidance can allow for: alleviation of stress (Langan-Fox, 2001), provision of trusted counsel (Parsloe, 1995), improved understanding of organisational politics (McKeen and Burke, 1989), and ‘making significant transitions in knowledge and thinking’ (Megginson and Clutterbuck, 1995). Each of these is likely to have organisational benefits, but counselling that fosters support and enhances development is immediately valuable on a personal level; in other words, where a person’s progress and sense of success is not
defined in terms of an organisational frame of reference (Colin, 2000). Counselling can be a powerful driver of learning, growth and self-discovery on an individual level (Ball and Jordan, 1997).

Scripts

Within mainstream social psychology, Schank and Abelson are most famously associated with use of the term script. They define a script as:

…a structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context… Thus a script is a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well known situation (Schank and Abelson, 1977: 41).

Within organisational psychology Gioia and Poole (1984: 449) define a script as a ‘schematic structure held in memory’ and that ‘specifies behavior or event sequences that are appropriate for specific situations’. Other, similar definitions can be found in: Abelson (1981: 717); Fiske and Taylor (1984: 169); Graesser, Woll, Kowalski and Smith (1980: 504); Lord and Kernan (1987: 266); Louis (1980: 240); Hayes (1998: 367); Mandler (1984: 14). The key elements of all these definitions can be synthesised thus, scripts are: (1) context specific, (2) event based (3) structures for organizing knowledge about (4) well-known situations. The sense of ‘well-known situations’ is impersonal, or social, so scripts deal with (5) cultural knowledge. Scripts can be understood as one form of shared discourse, a resource that helps us to negotiate the, ‘contexts, practices and politics of everyday life’ (Honan, Knobel, Baker, and Davies, 2000: 11). Within the literature on careers, the term script has been used by Barley (1989), to illustrate how careers are relationally constructed. Understood in this context, individual’s scripts about career mediate their interactions
with social institutions (Mallon and Cohen, 1999: 14). In other words, they are a means of understanding the relationship between structure and agency. In terms of the five elements of script identified above, scripts are event based and assist inference (so they shape individual action) but they concern well known contexts and cultural knowledge (so they concern social structures and institutions).

Since scripts organise shared knowledge, they are embedded at a cultural level. Because they are embedded at a cultural level, the influence of scripted ideas is likely to persist, even though the knowledge that these scripts summarise may have become obsolete. As an illustration, phrases such as ‘career ladder’, ‘fast track’ and ‘high-flyer’ can all be understood as indicating a career script where success is understood in terms of organisational hierarchies (El-Sawad, 2003). Since scripts organize knowledge, and assist inference and choice, their influence may also go unquestioned, because they represent ‘habits of mind’ (Louis and Sutton, 1991). This means that ideas about career success that are based on outmoded scripts may not be critically examined, but remain as invalid or limiting assumptions. As a result, choices about career could be influenced on a tacit level. This analysis suggests that recognising and challenging such scripts may be a way of enhancing effective thinking about careers. One way to conceptualise this process is as a form of problem finding (Arlin, 1990), which has been identified as a potential contribution for careers counselling (Arnold, 1997b).

**Socrates**

A prime example of problem finding, where tacit assumptions are identified and challenged, can be found in the dialogues of Plato, and is seen in particular in the
dialectical technique of Socrates. Models of wisdom have been advocated as a basis for enhancing effective careers thinking (Arnold, 1997b), but there has been little attempt to evaluate Socrates in this light. This is worth commenting on because Socrates, ‘has influenced subsequent thought as much as any person’ (Lee, 1987: 15). He was the inspiration for the first Academy, and subsequent schools, such as the Lyceum (Mautner, 1997), and the legacy of his dialogues has been so great as to set the limits of modern philosophy (Russell, 1984: 111). Socrates left no written record himself, so our understanding of him is always mediated by other commentators. This means we cannot separate Socrates the person from Socrates the character, but it is clear that Plato’s dialogues show a figure who by ‘rigorous argumentation and basic examination of principles’ (Mautner, 1997) has become synonymous with wisdom. This is a compelling argument for invoking consideration of Socrates in many fields, but there are further reasons why it is appropriate to consider him in terms of enhancing effective careers thinking.

The Socratic dialogues concern the ethical and personal elements that shape identity and guide individual action (Bolten, 2001). These elements are germane to consideration of how individuals construct their careers (Barley, 1989). Also, Socratic dialogue has long been recognised as an ideal medium for developing argument and critical thinking (Burnyeat, 1990). As a form of interaction, dialogue is particularly appropriate where we are interested in addressing questions that are open to inquiry, but beyond the scope of empirical testing or recourse to absolute authority (Magee, 2000). Dialogue is thus an appropriate medium for career counselling because questions about career are irreducibly complex. People’s careers are unique and subject to external uncertainties (Bird, 1996; Collin and Watts, 1996). They also
unfold over time and the consequences of particular career choices may not be apparent for many years (Arnold, 2001). Given these uncertainties, careers guidance can be understood as helping people whilst they try to resolve a fundamentally intractable problem; enabling them to choose wisely, rather than to make a wise choice (Katz, 1969). Analogously, Socrates exemplifies how there can be expert guidance whilst problematising the notion that solutions to complex problems can be dispensed (e.g. *Theaetetus*, 157cd). The questions addressed in the dialogues are too complicated to be resolved, though pursuing them can facilitate learning and enhance awareness of limiting assumptions. Increasing familiarity with Socrates’ dialectic technique also means we can enhance our own facility for internal dialogue. Doing this, and imagining different perspectives provides a means of ‘decentring’ (Arnold, 1997b) with subsequent potential for synthesis of contradictory viewpoints - a feature of what Kramer calls ‘advanced thinking’ (Kramer, 1989). Finally, Howard (2000: 411) recently suggested the ‘process of asking questions about the basis of previous answers’ as ‘supporting all counselling’ (ibid: 417). This process - of asking questions about the basis of previous answers - summarises the essence of the Socratic method.

**Socratic Method**

Socrates’ method of questioning takes different forms, but in its essence, it is a way of asking questions about beliefs. Sustained cross-examination and the questioning of basic assumptions reveals inconsistencies in beliefs that would otherwise go unrecognised and unchallenged. In Plato’s dialogues, we often find that the source of these inconsistencies is an uncritical adherence to dogma. In part, this dogma was a product of the sophists - professional speakers and educators - who proffered
instruction in citizenship and statecraft. The sophists held considerable sway over public affairs largely because, ‘they became the dominant educational influence… especially among the more talented and wealthy families, who were naturally best able to afford their fees’ (Guthrie, 1956: 12). These lecturers cum salesmen taught oratory, political skills, leadership and trained people for roles in public life. In doing so, they created a set of social scripts that gave Athenians a way of understanding how to negotiate life within the world’s first City state. Their teachings became scripts because they were widely embraced and they prescribed a recipe for individual action (how to be successful) in well-known social contexts (in the courts, or market place).

Socrates was an arch anti-sophist, challenging the basis for many of their pronouncements through dialogue and rigorous, sustained questioning. The motivation for this was to expose the inconsistency between the sophist’s secular role and their claims to truths about the nature of virtue, justice, courage and wisdom (MacIntyre, 1985). The Sophist’s pronouncements are adopted uncritically by many of Socrates’ protagonists, but quickly exposed as flawed in the dialogues. In dramatising this, Plato shows how a shorthand recipe for negotiating public life breaks down under cross-examination. For example in the Gorgias, in pursuit of the question ‘what is justice’, we find that Gorgias’ answer ‘what is to the interest of the stronger’ leads to injustice in some situations (ibid. 139). So, Socrates demonstrates how ‘solutions’ to such questions are fundamentally flawed. This process results in problem finding, for example, Meno (Meno, 80b) tells Socrates:

…I have spoken about virtue hundreds of times, held forth often on the subject in front of very large audiences, and very well too, or so I thought. Now I can’t even say what it is.
Meno arrives at this conclusion after a harrowing cross examination where Socrates’ questioning lays bare inconsistencies in Meno’s beliefs about virtue. This questioning is a feature of all the dialogues, but the brief illustration below (please see table 1) is sufficient to identify some key elements.

Please Insert Table 1

The table shows how Socrates’ method of asking for a definitive answer to a complex question can quickly expose the shortcomings of a script. This is done in three stages, as shown. The extracts are taken from the opening passages of the Republic, whose central question is, ‘what is justice?’ Cephalus (a wealthy businessman) is asked to state the greatest single benefit his wealth has brought him. In response, he explains how it means he is able to balance his books, both in a spiritual and a secular sense. Socrates then shows how Cephalus is depending on an underlying script for what justice is, namely that it is telling the truth and paying one’s debts. Socrates shows how this definition could be problematic, by asking Cephalus to imagine a scenario where this formula would not work. In contemporary language we might describe this technique as using ‘thought experiment’ (Folger and Turillo, 1999). He asks if we should repay a debt if this results in harm to our creditor – would you return a borrowed knife to someone who wanted to harm themselves? Cephalus agrees that repayment in this case is not the right thing to do, so the thought experiment shows how he holds inconsistent beliefs, and thus reveals the inadequacy of the conventional definition. This method is transferable to the domain of career counselling because it can show how we may rely on conventional ideas of career success without recognising that questions about career are irreducibly complex, and that conventional
recipes for success may be outmoded. The act of problematising these conventional ideas can enhance effective thinking about careers. To illustrate how this technique might work in practice, and in the particular context of careers counselling, the fragment of fictional dialogue below shows a discussion between a careers counsellor ‘S’ (Sophie) and a graduate ‘P’ (Phil). The right-hand column shows the various stages of the method, following the schema shown in table 1. Though an idealised version, this dialogue illustrates how the technique could be used to uncover assumptions about career success.

Please Insert Table 2

Limitations

The dialogue in table 2 is designed to show multiple applications of this simple three stage technique in a short space. Accordingly, this does show the technique ‘red in tooth and claw’. Reading through the dialogue aloud would give a sense of how clients might quickly become frustrated and annoyed, at overuse or inappropriate use of the technique. This exercise might also reveal how the counsellor could easily sound smug and self-satisfied. This is obviously a long way removed from how the technique should work in a counselling setting, however it is useful to see this technique in its undiluted form because it illustrates a number of limitations to the method. Most notably, there is not likely to be any perfect definition, or solution to a career problem, so in one sense the technique could be seen as fruitless. More worryingly, inappropriate use of cross-examination and refutation would be likely to leave clients bewildered or desolate and low in confidence. This is a long way removed from basic notions of good practice in counselling, for example the use of
encouragement, sympathetic listening, positive reinforcement, empathising and advising in addition to effective questioning (Hirsh, Jackson and Kidd, 2001; Kirschner, Hoffman and Hill, 1994; Watts and Kidd, 2000).

Using Socrates as a model of wisdom could also lead to establishing an unhelpful or naïve myth about counselling (Colley, 2001). For example, as indicated above, Socratic techniques need to be tempered and part of an overall programme for providing guidance. There are other problems with a literal operationalisation of counsellor-as-Socrates and client-as-Socrates’ pupil. Any form of one to one counselling may reinforce inequity. This could be exacerbated given some of the unhelpful connotations to the model of Socrates. Whoever is ‘Socrates’ implicitly has a monopoly on expertise, and therefore has more power. On the other hand, Socrates may be an impossible role model for the counsellor to live up to. Consider for example, the image of his submitting willingly to drinking hemlock:

‘I… pray the gods that my removal from this world to the other may be prosperous. This is my prayer, then; and I hope that it may be granted.’ With these words, quite calmly with no sign of distaste, he drained the cup in one draft (Phaedo: 117c).

This shows Socrates is an impossible role model, but it also implies a degree of certainty that is inconsistent with the complexities of career choice (Cohen, 2001). To some degree the threat of a harmful myth is inescapable, since this paper draws on such a well established figure in Western thought. However, in mitigation, there are ways these limitations could be obviated.
Firstly, it is important to see this technique as one potential strand within careers counselling. Any programme of counselling should continue to be guided by notions such as sympathetic listening and positive reinforcement and should take place in a supportive environment (Hirsh et al., 2001; Watts and Kidd, 2000). Experienced counsellors will recognise that this technique is only likely to be helpful at certain stages of the process. Most obviously perhaps, it seems suitable in the initial stages of a discussion (once a supportive environment and rapport have been established), perhaps to introduce new ideas or to redefine the boundaries to problems. Alternatively, it may be a means of reinvigorating a discussion. Secondly, explicitly using role play affords dramatic possibilities that could collapse the myth, for example alternating parts and taking it in turns to ‘play’ Socrates. A third option would be to emphasise the fundamentally subversive role of Socrates, challenging the sophists and the Athenian hegemony. This subversion is notable in the *Meno*, where he ridicules an imperious aristocrat, and in the *Apology*, where he mocks the Athenian court. Finally, making the potential dangers of using Socrates as a role model explicit may be enough to defuse the threat of a harmful new myth.

**Conclusion**

The Socratic dialogues show how definitive, analytical answers are not the only measure of success in philosophy, or in teaching (Burnyeat, 1990). Analogously, learning effective careers thinking cannot be a matter of receiving instruction, or the acquisition of a body of propositional knowledge (Arnold, 1997b). Learning by acquisition is suited to developing knowledge of received body of belief or opinion. Socratic dialogue is more experiential because it involves learning a method of inquiry through practice and reflection. This inquiry is based on questioning and the
careful development of ideas, which are then tested. The Socratic method can be a way of prompting personal reflection by making explicit commonly held beliefs about the nature of careers. These beliefs could be understood as social scripts (Schank and Abelson, 1977), or discourses (Honan et al, 2000). These scripts may be invalid given changes in the way we work, and changes in the social contract (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hutton, 1995; Sennett, 1998). In addition, supportive, but rigorous dialogic inquiry can facilitate personal development (Langan-Fox, 2001; Megginson and Clutterbuck, 1995; Parsloe, 1995).

It is important to keep in mind that although the rigorous pursuit of complex questions can make us aware of limiting assumptions, the impossibility of a perfect answer to a career problem means pursuing a definitive answer is in one sense fruitless. This re-signals the importance of acknowledging the power imbalance in such a dialogue. Whoever ‘plays’ Socrates is likely to be able to show up the limitations in any definition of a complex construct, if only by virtue of the nature of language. This technique will be best used where it allows clients to recognise how tacit assumptions, or scripts, relating to career choice are in conflict with their own ideas about what makes for a wise choice, a successful career, or a good life.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extract and Speaker</th>
<th>[Stage] and Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socrates “What do you think is the greatest advantage you have gained from being so rich?”</td>
<td>[1] Socrates asks Cephalus, the true value of his success. This is stage one of the process, a quest for a definitive answer to a complex question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cephalus “When a man faces the thought of death there come into his mind anxieties that did not trouble him before… he is filled with doubts and fears and begins to reckon up and see if there is anyone he has wronged… wealth contributes very greatly to one’s ability to avoid both unintentional cheating or lying and the fear that one has left some sacrifice to God unmade or some debt to man unpaid before one dies.”</td>
<td>[2] Cephalus answers that money is useful because it can help settle the score. The response to Socrates’ complex question is stage two in the process. In this case, Cephalus proposes a conventional view of justice. In fact this could legitimately be called a script for what justice is, since it is based on the writings of Simonides, who - at that time - was a widely known lyric poet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socrates “…are we really to say that doing right consists simply and solely in truthfulness and returning anything we have borrowed? Are those not actions that can be sometimes right and sometimes wrong? For instance, if one borrowed a weapon from a friend who subsequently went out of his mind and then asked for it back, surely it would be generally agreed that one ought not to return it, and that it would not be right to do so, nor to consent to tell the strict truth to a madman?”</td>
<td>[3] Socrates reduces this to its essence – Cephalus claims to benefit from money because it enables him to ‘do right’. Socrates problematises this moral calculus with a dramatic, but simple thought experiment. Truth telling and repaying debts are not always ‘right’, as Cephalus later concedes. This is stage three. This shows how relying on a scripted response to a complex question can lead to inconsistencies in beliefs and less than appropriate action.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 2 Fragment of a Fictional Dialogue Annotated to Show the Method in Practice**

S: what do you think a successful career means for you?  
P: well just like any career, it will be progressing through a series of jobs.  

S: is this progress in a ‘space’ sense – going onwards and upwards - or in a  
‘time’ sense – over the course of your working life?  
P: well I think it’s both really.  
S: but the passage of time isn’t the same as progress is it?  I mean we all get  
older whether we like it or not?  
P: true.

S: would you be successful if you had the same job for a long time?  
P: well no, then I wouldn’t be a success.  
S: so, if I understand you correctly, you can't have a successful career unless  
you have more than one job. Presumably also, because these are a series, one  
job will lead on to the next, and successive jobs will be better - else that  
wouldn't be successful either?  
P: yes, ideally, but I guess the way organisations are flatter now, I will  
probably have to move sideways from time to time in order to make real  
progress… Look, what I really wanted was some career advice. Thinking  
about how to define career, or about life in general is quite interesting, but it’s  
not much use in practice.

S: okay, let's explore that. I guess what you're saying is, it's irrelevant  
because no matter how we define career, you know that you want to have a  
successful career?  
P: yes that’s right, but doesn't everybody want their career to be a success?  

S: well, that’s interesting. I’d argue that if you stop and think about that  
you’ll realise that that is only true if we have a very broad definition of career.  
For example, for many people it’s more important to them to have a good  
quality of life, and fulfilling personal relationships than it is to do well at  
work. Depending on how it is defined, a successful career may well directly  
conflict with these goals.  
P: well that's true as well.  
S: so, as you put it, thinking about ‘life in general’ might be relevant after all?  
P: I guess so. All right then, maybe it is useful to think about how to define  
things occasionally, but how does that help me succeed at work?  

S: well, let me start by asking you what you think it means for you to succeed  
at work.  
P: off the top of my head, I think there are two ways in which people can do
well. Firstly, there are tangible rewards, such as: pay and benefits, title, 
having one's own office, car or parking space. Secondly, there are softer 
rewards, such as: recognition, friendship, esteem, satisfaction, learning and 
growing.

S: that’s a good standard answer, I reckon any management guru would be 
proud of that. The problem is, you haven't said anything about what you want 
to do, how you want to do it, or where. Do you not think that it's important 
to consider these things when you're thinking about what it means to succeed? 
Or are you happy to go along with someone else’s definition of success – 
better pay, a nice car and title etc.
P: I see what you mean, I suppose each of those things could be found in 
many jobs… So I suppose you want me to tell you what kind of job I want?

S: not yet. My guess is that it would be worth your spending some more time 
thinking that through. What I'd like you to do is tell me more carefully the 
kinds of things that would make for a successful career for you.
P: okay. I guess once I’ve done that I’ll be on my way to deciding on my 
career?

S: that's possible, but I think you’d need an amazing degree of foresight. 
Many people’s careers are affected by luck, or random events or changes they 
can’t control. In any case (if I’m allowed a standard interview question) can 
you honestly tell me what kinds of things you would like to be doing in five or 
ten years time – at work I mean.
P: I would find that hard – I think that answer would be easier if you asked me 
the kind of life I would want.
S: so I guess thinking about life in general might be useful?
P: yes.

S: ok, let’s, assume for the moment that you could decide on the kind of work 
you want now, what basis would you make that decision on?
P: well I guess I need to think about the things that I want out of life first.

S: it’s interesting that you didn’t think about that before coming to see me. 
Was that because you thought you knew what you wanted?
P: yes, I think most people know what they want from a career.

S: I don’t have any evidence for that. Many people have little choice 
wouldn’t you say?
P: well ok – but they know what they would like.

S: but you ‘knew what you would like’ didn’t you? You knew you wanted a 
successful career.
P: yes, I suppose I took it for granted what that means.
References


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i This paper follows the standard convention of referencing Plato using the pages of an early collection, where each page is divided into roughly equal parts. This convention is also followed in the editions of Plato referenced here.