

## ***Advising on career image: perspectives, practice and politics***

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### **Abstract**

This article analyses qualitative data gathered from a survey of career practitioners on the issue of career image (n=355, 75% female, 89% white and 78% from the UK). Findings reveal three key themes which represent how career image relates to practitioners' values and beliefs, how practitioners make decisions about whether to address the topic in their practice and the strategies they use to address career image with their clients. Findings are discussed with reference to Watts's socio-political ideologies of guidance. The data indicate that career practitioners are often uncomfortable about discussing career image, but address it where they believe that it is important to their clients' success. While some practitioners believe the existing structures to be unjust they generally seek to address this injustice at the individual level rather than seeking any kind of social transformation.

### **Keywords**

**Career guidance, appearance, attractiveness, career image**

### **Introduction**

Careers are not fuelled by qualification and experience alone. Who you are, how you look and how you present yourself both visually and through your interpersonal skills make a difference to your career. The literature highlights a wide range of different aspects of appearance and interpersonal skills which can influence individuals' careers including: facial attractiveness identified in a study in the US (Sala, Terraneo, Lucchini & Knies, 2013); vocal attractiveness in the UK (McCarthy, 2012); style of dress in an international study across 6 countries in Europe, North America and the Middle East (Subhani & Azmat, 2012) and the intersection between appearance and gender (Haskin, 2015). Such findings have been repeatedly observed across a range of cultural contexts and appear to endure across different time periods (Little & Roberts, 2012).

Hooley and Yates (2015) have developed the concept of 'career image' to encapsulate the ideas which have emerged from this literature. Career image comprises three main constructs: beauty, aesthetic self-presentation and interpersonal skills. They have presented evidence that suggests that all three of these constructs influence the development of individuals' careers.

The literature around career image poses a number of challenging questions. If, as the research suggests, beauty, appearance and charm all convey advantages on individuals, how should society respond to this? Such attributes are superficial and seem to have little bearing on whether an individual will be able to do a particular role, so the rewards which are openly and consistently afforded to those with an attractive career image could be considered unjust. Such issues of social justice and injustice raise questions about what stance career guidance should take. Watts's (2015)

discussion of the socio-political ideologies of guidance is helpful here, highlighting that guidance can take different positions depending on how it orientates towards the individual or society, and towards change or the status quo. We will argue that this is a useful framework for the consideration of practitioner responses to issues of career image.

In cases where other unearned personal attributes convey advantages (race, gender, class etc.), numerous initiatives exist which seek to level the playing field but legislation to outlaw 'lookism' and other forms of discrimination based on appearance has proved difficult to develop and enforce (Toledano, 2013). The issue of career image is, however, not wholly analogous to conventional equality strands such as race, gender and class. Firstly, the assumption that career image has no relation to an individual's ability to do a job is contestable. In some professions, aspects of appearance are thought to be important: we expect models to be beautiful, stylists to be well dressed and front of house staff to be charming. Empirical evidence suggests that attractive workers are shown in some contexts to be more effective in their roles: attractive politicians are more likely to win votes in the UK (Milazzo and Mattes, 2015), and studies in the US show that attractive sales assistants make more sales (Ahearne, Gruen and Jarvis, 1999) and that an attractive CEO positively impacts their company's reputation and performance (Fetscherin, 2015).

The second way in which career image differs from conventional equality strands such as gender or race, is that it is possible to change one's career image. An individual could lose weight, style their hair, acquire a greater command of etiquette and, if the funds are available, could hire a stylist, personal trainer or plastic surgeon, and attend a deportment class. While it is not possible for all of us to rival Hollywood's most beautiful stars, for many there is considerable scope for improvement if we have the will, determination, aesthetic judgement, self-awareness and financial resources.

Career image therefore poses an interesting ethical issue. At first glance it shares many of the characteristics of other equality strands but on closer examination it is less clear cut. The influence of career image may sometimes be justified and it is possible for individuals to develop their capital in this area just as they can develop other aspects of human capital. Yet the breadth and depth of the impact it has within society and the fact that false assumptions of its relevance and potency lead to unfair discrimination suggests that it is reasonable to question its role in society and to consider whether we should strike a more critical position on these issues.

Career practitioners deal with clients' career images and the associated ethical challenges on a daily basis. Yates, Hooley and Bagri Kaur (2016) gathered quantitative and qualitative data from career practitioners to explore their practices regarding career image. Their analysis of the quantitative data revealed that career practitioners acknowledged the importance of career image, that they were prepared to engage with the topic and that they had experience of providing support for clients in this area. The practitioners in this study however also raised concerns about the level of training and support available in relation to these issues and concern about the ethics of addressing career image.

The current study builds on this by using the qualitative responses from the same survey to gain further insights into how careers workers actually address the issue of career image in their practice. Specifically this study aimed to examine career practitioners' reasons for their professional choices. It was hoped that the qualitative responses could provide insights into how career workers feel about addressing the issue of career, how they integrate it into the wider frameworks that inform

their practice and how they respond to the issues of ethics and social justice that are raised by this area. It is anticipated that the findings can provide a starting point from which to develop a wider consensus of an appropriate professional response to the topic and guidelines for practice which is both effective and ethical.

## **Methodology**

This study explores the professional practices and attitudes of career workers on the topic of appearance and attractiveness in career and career practice. Following ethical approval, an online questionnaire was used to generate qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data generated were analysed in Yates, Hooley and Bagri Kaur (in press) and this paper presents a thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

### ***Participants***

The research was intended to be broad and exploratory so an inclusive approach to participant recruitment was used, with the researchers drawing on their existing networks, websites, social media and email distribution lists from professional bodies within the UK and internationally. One limitation of this approach to recruitment is that it may not have generated a representative sample, as participants were likely to self-select on the basis of an interest in this field.

The questionnaire was submitted by 498 participants, and cleaning the data resulted in a dataset of 399 career practitioners, of which 355 provided usable answers to the open questions. Participants were predominantly female (75%), reported a range of ages, ethnicities and client groups, and came from the UK (78%), the rest of Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. A detailed breakdown of these is presented in Table 1.

### **Survey**

The survey contained 29 questions, composed of 6 requesting demographic information about participants, 5 exploring participants' development needs, 10 addressing current practice and 8 which explored practitioners' attitudes to career image. Participant responses to four open-text questions were analysed. The first, *'Do you have any comments about talking to clients about career image?'*, was presented to all participants at the end of the section on career practice; 199 participants provided a text response to this question. The second *'Why would you not advise on career image?'* was presented only to the participants who had stated that they would not discuss image with their clients; 11 (out of a possible 16) participants provided a response. The third *'Under what circumstances would you have this discussion?'* was presented only to participants who had stated that they would or might discuss career image with their clients. Also, participants were given 8 quantitative options which they could tick and a 9<sup>th</sup> option labelled 'other' which offered an open text box with an unlimited word count. Participants were invited to tick as many of the options as they felt applied to them; 47 participants (out of a possible 383) provided a qualitative response to this question. The final question *'What barriers might exist to discourage advisors giving advice about how they look?'* was situated at the start of the section on development needs. It was presented to all participants and 308 provided responses.

Using an online survey to collect qualitative data has the obvious advantage of enabling the researchers to collect data from a more geographically disparate group. But the data collection method has limitations. With an open-text question, the researchers are not in a position to probe the participants further and clarify the respondents' meanings in the way they might in semi-structured interviews. In addition to these more general methodological limitations, in this survey the breadth of the qualitative data was diminished by the small number of qualitative questions included, and the written responses to these survey questions were generally fairly short, sometimes just a word or two. Establishing a complete and nuanced understanding of the individual experiences of participants is therefore difficult, yet the wide range of data gathered provides valuable insights for an indicative study such as this. A further limitation comes from the collection of two types of data (quantitative and qualitative) in this single survey, which may have an impact on the validity of the overall picture painted by the qualitative data.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data were analysed using a thematic analysis, chosen in this study for its ability to summarise the key features of a large body of data and for its suitability for analysis in under-researched areas such as this (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis has been criticised for its lack of commitment to a particular epistemology and is sometimes considered as no more than a tool which can be used within different analytical approaches (Boyzatis, 1998). More recently it has garnered support as a method in its own right, as a 'flexible and useful research tool which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p 81).

The data were analysed inductively. Inductive analysis is a data-driven approach to thematic analysis, which aims to link the themes closely to the data (Patton, 1990) and involves identifying themes within the data rather than using pre-existing codes. The data analysis took place at a semantic level, identifying the explicit meaning of the data and progressing from a description of the patterns to an interpretation aiming to understand their broader significance (Patton, 1990).

The process of analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (ibid) six steps: familiarise yourself with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes; define and name themes and produce the report. The steps were followed recursively, going back and forth between steps as needed to develop a coherent thematic narrative.

Mindful of the risks of bias and influence from the researchers' own theoretical and epistemological positions, every effort was made to stay close to the data during analysis. The analysis was conducted on data which included both the stem question and the answer, and the data from all four questions were aggregated and then coded together. To establish intercoder reliability, the two researchers based their coding on the process outlined by Hirschka et al. (2004). They examined a portion of the data independently and proposed a set of themes. Through discussion and debate an agreed codebook was then developed and used to code a random sample of the data. The codebook was then modified and used to code the entire dataset.

The codes were collated into potential themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and examples were gathered for each theme from the entire data set. The themes were defined and named and sub-themes were identified in order to enhance the overall narrative.

## Findings

Table 2 presents the themes and subthemes identified using the qualitative data from the online survey of career practitioners. The numbers in brackets reflect the frequency with which each theme or subtheme was coded in the data. These numbers have been included in order to provide some indication of the strength of findings, but it is important to bear in mind that the number of occurrences of a particular feature doesn't necessarily point to its significance.

**Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes**

Theme	Sub-theme
Personal Perspectives (137)*	Emotional response (53)
	Values (37)
	Beliefs about career image (47)
Decisions about practice (327)	Element of career image (34)
	Type of client (67)
	Anticipated outcome (92)
	Practitioner confidence / uncertainty (82)
	Professional boundaries (52)
Practitioner Strategies (155)	Depersonalisation (39)
	Interpersonal skills (69)
	Non-directivity (47)

\*Numbers in brackets represent the number of times this theme or sub-theme was coded

As seen in Table 2, the data revealed three key themes, *personal perspectives* on the issue of career image, *decisions about practice* and whether to address career image with clients and *practitioner strategies* which could be, or had been used to facilitate their career conversations on the topic.

### Personal perspectives

This theme describes career practitioners' emotional reactions to the concept of career image, their ideas about the role that career image plays in shaping individuals' career paths and its place in their career conversations.

**Emotional response** describes career practitioners' emotional responses to the topic. This was dominated by a widely-shared sense of discomfort, encapsulated by one participant: '*it's uncomfortable no matter how many times you approach the subject*'. Career practitioners reported feeling uncomfortable with the idea of discussing issues which are '*too personal*' and sometimes '*socially taboo*' with clients. They depicted concerns about damaging clients' self-esteem, '*you try telling someone who's ugly to get a face lift*' or risking '*ruining [their] working relationship*'. Many career practitioners reported that despite their personal discomfort, they were prepared to have these discussions with clients, as one practitioner summarised '*it's my job to have a difficult conversation if it'll help the individual get their job*'; in contrast, some indicated that their personal feelings might have an impact on their professional choices, as one practitioner commented '*if I didn't feel comfortable I would be unlikely to tackle this*'.

**Values** relates to the ethical and professional values of the respondents. Many career practitioners stated their belief that the impact of career image on career success is unfair *'it should be about ability but I don't think it always is'*, and reported that suggesting that clients might want to change their appearance to conform to a societal ideal image does not align with their values *'I do not think it is morally correct as a practitioner to encourage people to conform to stereotypes'*. But practitioners reported that they experienced a conflict of values as they tried to align their distaste for the notion that people are judged by appearance with their professional drive to support their clients. Ultimately, many career practitioners who participated in the survey concluded that *'it is much easier not to but to avoid it is to fail our clients'*, and displayed a strong client-centred ethos underpinning their practice *'it's not about you, it's about them!'*.

**Beliefs about career image** relates to how important career practitioners felt that career image is to individuals' careers. Many reported their beliefs that appearance and attractiveness do matter to career success, as one practitioner stated *'it is important'*. Some, however, noted that career paths are influenced by many different things, and that whilst career image does play its part, other aspects may have a greater impact *'it's one of many factors – it's not the most important one'*. Others acknowledged that *'attractiveness is a very subjective concept'*, stressing that the ideal career image will vary from industry to industry and from individual to individual.

### **Decisions about practice**

The second theme describes the heuristics participating career practitioners rely on when making decisions about whether to, and when to discuss issues of career image with clients. Five sub-themes were identified which indicated that participants' professional decisions are made on the basis of the type of client, the particular element of career image in question, the anticipated outcome of the conversation, the practitioner's professional certainty and professional boundaries.

The survey revealed that the particular **element of career image** in question has an impact on career practitioners' choices about whether to raise it. Practitioners reported that they might be more likely to raise the topics which they themselves found easier to discuss *'I generally feel comfortable discussing interpersonal skills and body language [...] not at all comfortable discussing personal appearance'*. Some practitioners would limit their discussions on career image to helping clients to *'avoid basic mistakes'*, with advice such as *'wear clean clothes [...] brush your hair, brush your teeth'*. Others would reserve discussions for extreme cases *'only if it really needed pointing out'*, for example, *'someone with loads of makeup / jewellery wanting to work in a corporate environment'*. Decisions were also based on how personal the particular aspect was thought to be *'mentioning weight loss feels a step too far into the personal'*, and how easy it might be for the individual to change, with practitioners avoiding discussions about *'things they can't change short term such as weight and tattoos'*.

Practitioners' reported that their professional decisions were influenced by the **type of client** that they were working with. In terms of demographic characteristics, practitioners would be more likely to open discussions with clients who had little experience within the workplace *'if they were new to work or new to our culture'*, highlighting younger clients, those who had been out of work for a long time and those who had come to the UK from overseas.

One practitioner commented that their professional decisions were made on the basis of a *'cost-benefit analysis'*, and this is at the heart of the **anticipated outcome** sub-theme. Career practitioners indicated that they would choose to have a conversation about career image if they believed that it would lead to a positive impact on the client. Four different possible positive consequences were mentioned. The outcome most often expressed was enhancing job seeking success: practitioners reported that they would make the choice to discuss career image if they perceived their client's *'current image to be a real barrier to them in finding work'*. Clarifying career goals was also considered a possible positive outcome for career image conversations. Some practitioners felt that a discussion which highlighted a mismatch between an employer's ideal image and the client's current appearance might lead to fruitful discussions around person-environment fit, *'how people choose their appearance may be a significant key to elements of their career choice'*. The third positive outcome which might motivate a career practitioner to discuss career image was to boost self-esteem: practitioners reported that they would raise the topic if they believed the discussion could lead to changes which could *'encourage positive feelings of self-worth'*. Finally, some practitioners too reported that they might make a judgement about whether a client would be likely to take the discussion *'in the manner that it was intended'*, and would avoid the subject if they felt the client might not take it well: *'you have to be aware that some people could take offence'*.

**Practitioner confidence/uncertainty** about addressing career image was reported to have an impact on professional decisions. Practitioners, for example, discussed a lack of confidence in their own expertise and credibility, in terms of their knowledge, their own career image and their skills.

Practitioners were sometimes unsure of their own expertise in this arena: *'how qualified are we, really, to give that kind of advice?'*. Some highlighted the challenge of developing and maintaining expertise in an arena which is sector specific (*'not knowing what might be expected for specific career areas'*) and subjective (*'it's just difficult to know what the advice should be as the whole area of appearance is so subjective'*). Participating practitioners revealed that a lack of confidence in their own career image may influence whether they raise the topic with clients, *'I don't feel qualified to do so – particularly as a male who is sartorially challenged at the best of times!'*, and that they might be issues around age, *'perhaps younger advisers may not feel confident to discuss difficult subjects'* or gender, *'it can be easier to discuss appearance with someone of the same gender'*.

**Professional boundaries** were not always clear cut and some practitioners indicated that they felt that discussions about career image might not be appropriate for their professional context, *'maybe it's over stepping the professional boundaries'*. Specifically, participants reported that they were not always clear about legal and cultural boundaries, *'lack of knowledge about religious consideration or relevant legislation'*. A number of respondents stated that potential cultural sensitivities might play their part in practitioner decisions, indicating that they might be reluctant to raise career image for *'fear of discussing anything related to culture or religion'*.

### **Practitioner strategies**

From the themes already identified it is clear that for many practitioners, conversations around career image are not undertaken lightly. Many practitioners believed career image to be important and, under certain circumstances, they were willing to address it with clients. Their key concerns were that a discussion on this matter may cause distress to the client or damage their working relationship. To minimise the risk, practitioners described a number of strategies which they use:

depersonalising the subject matter, employing a variety of sophisticated interpersonal skills, and using non-directivity.

Practitioners used **depersonalisation** to create a distance between the subject matter and the client, the practitioner and even the guidance context. Practitioners made the discussions less personal for the clients by focusing on the role: *'it's not a personal thing in the sense that it is a criticism of them it is about explaining how to fit in a specific "role" better'*, or actions: *'keep it factual and link it to behaviour'*, rather than the client themselves. Practitioners often preferred raising the issue in general rather than highlighting specific examples. They indicated that one way to achieve this was to have discussions in a group work context rather than in a one to one, suggesting that it is *'easier done in a lecture / workshop setting than face to face as you can talk in more general terms'*. In order to make the conversations less personal to the practitioner, respondents reported that they would quote employers: *'it doesn't have to be personal, I give advice based on feedback from recruiters about what works. So it doesn't come over as me commenting'*, or research: *'it probably helps to use a recent study'*, rather than owning the views themselves. Clients are encouraged to take the topic outside the guidance context as participants reported that they suggest that clients might want to research the topic themselves: *'I always advise career seekers to do research on [...] dress codes'*, or to use others' expertise, perhaps asking *'friends or their peers to give the advice'*.

The career practitioners indicated that they used high-level **interpersonal skills** to ensure that the conversations about career image were as positive as possible, and stressed that *'it all depends on the client and your relationship with them'*. They highlighted the importance of a strong professional relationship built on honesty and *'unconditional positive regard for clients'*, and raised the topics *'with sensitivity and positively'*.

The third strategy which participating career practitioners described to ensure the net effectiveness of their conversations about career image made use of **non-directivity**. Practitioners in this survey reported that they made use of a non-directive approach as a strategy to ensure that the clients took ownership of the discussions and that conversations did not go further than the clients wanted. To this end, practitioners would allow the client to raise the topic: *'I wouldn't have raised it if she hadn't asked me'*, would focus on the features of career image which the client thinks are important allowing the client to lead *'on what aspects are important'* and would acknowledge the subjectivity of the arena: *'I don't believe I would present it as if "I knew the right answer" as this is a very subjective area'*. Some practitioners revealed a reluctance to give advice to clients as one participant asserted, *'I wouldn't be suggesting the right answer'*, on the grounds that they believed that the client is in the strongest position to make their own choices: *'it is best to help the client imagine what is best for themselves'*.

The approaches depicted by practitioners were presented as pragmatic ones which they had developed through trial and error. Practitioners highlighted that they developed their strategies through knowledge gleaned from their personal lives: *'I only feel confident and comfortable giving that sort of advice because I have children of student age myself'*, honed their practice through self-reflection: *'On reflection I wish I had not said anything but had waited for her to raise the issue'*, and presented their techniques tentatively: *'it probably helps to use a recent study on how appearance influences you chances of getting a job.'*

## Discussion

The findings from the qualitative data indicate that, for these respondents, career image is deemed an appropriate topic for career practice. The quantitative data provided by the same participants and explored in Yates, Hooley and Bagri Kaur (2016) indicated that 96% of respondents 'would' or 'might' have discussions about career image with clients. The power of qualitative research lies in its ability to uncover the subtleties of participants' experiences, and whilst the quantitative data may indicate that practitioners are generally willing to incorporate discussion on career image in their professional practice, the qualitative data paint a more nuanced picture. The findings of this thematic analysis suggest that the topic is generally considered to be not just an appropriate, but an integral part of career conversations, and practitioners' comments revealed that whilst practitioners were not always comfortable with these conversations, they felt that it was their professional duty not to shy away from the subject. The practitioner discomfort that emerged as one of the more dominant motifs in the data, highlights the tension between practitioners' beliefs about how they should behave and the ease with which they felt they could put their principles into action. The discomfort associated with engaging with these conversations was variously discussed by practitioners as part of themes relating to ***emotional responses, values, element of career image, practitioner confidence/uncertainty*** and ***professional boundaries***.

Practitioners emphasised the importance of maintaining both the client's self-esteem and the working relationship between their clients and themselves. The value of these two areas which practitioners are keen to preserve is supported by research in the literature which underscores that self-esteem is closely linked to successful career outcomes (Kanfer, Wanberg and Kantrowitz, 2001) and that the relationship between client and practitioner has an impact on the effectiveness of the intervention (Heppner and Hendricks, 1995; Masdonati, Massoudi & Rossier, 2009).

The strategies used by practitioners to allow them to negotiate career image topics successfully emerged from the data as strong themes, indicating that within this population they are widely shared. Whilst the approaches were common across many participating practitioners, a question remains about the process practitioners used to formulate these strategies. There is little written about the topic either in the academic literature or practitioner handbooks and it is not a subject which is regularly covered at careers conferences or continuing professional development (CPD) events within the UK. This context might lead us to surmise that despite the homogeneity of views seen in the data, each practitioner has reached their own conclusions and devised their own strategies independently.

None of the career practitioners explicitly linked their approaches to any theory, but it is possible to see a range of different ideologies and associated theories which underpin the strategies described. These perspectives broadly mapped onto Watts's (2015) typology of the four socio-political ideologies that career guidance can adopt. Watts describes these as liberal, conservative, progressive and radical and we will use this framework to discuss the approaches that career practitioners articulated in relation to their practice around career image. Watts's model distinguishes between theories which are socially orientated (conservative and radical) and those that are individually orientated (progressive and liberal). In general the responses from the survey suggested that practitioners' approaches were individually rather than socially orientated, with most responses falling into two ideologies, progressive and liberal. Overall, three of the four guidance

ideologies (liberal, conservative and progressive) were represented in the data while the fourth ideology (radical) was notably absent from the narratives of the practitioners.

Radical approaches to guidance seek to embed guidance within wider social movements and to view guidance as an instrument for social transformation. Such a stance could draw on the feedback and advocacy roles that are often included in definitions of guidance (e.g. SCAGES, 1993; UDACE, 1986) and might lead a practitioner to share their concerns about an over-focus on appearance with employers or to advocate for clients who appear to have been the victim of unfair discrimination. Many of the practitioners indicated that they felt some discomfort about the impact that career image had in our society (*'I would like career image not to matter'*), but whilst a radical approach to practice might seek to redress this undue and unfair focus on image, this perspective was entirely absent from the data. Although many career practitioners in the survey perceived the system to be unjust, their response was framed in terms of helping individuals to navigate this unfair system rather than seeking to change it.

As with radical approaches, conservative approaches to guidance also prioritise the service of society over the individual. In such approaches the role of guidance is to ensure the smooth functioning of society and to contribute to social harmony. By aiding individuals to identify their skills and attributes and match them with societal needs, conservative guidance supports everyone to find a place in the world. A minority of career practitioners focused on the role that career image could play in career decision making (***anticipated outcome***). These practitioners indicated that a mismatch between a client's image and the typical image for an employer may indicate a lack of person-organisation fit, and that clients might be better suited to an employer or industry whose typical image was more similar to their own. The career practitioner adopting a conservative approach to guidance may be assuming that elements of the client's image are social identity markers which reflect a set of work-related values (Cheryan 2013; Elsbach, 2004) and which may indicate a suitable career choice: *'how people choose their appearance may be a significant key to elements of their career choice'*.

Proponents of conservative guidance highlight the importance of fitting in as a way to maintain a harmonious society, and could assume that clients' appearance provides valuable clues about how they might best fit into society. The aim and the consequence of this approach are to perpetuate the existing social structures. The practices described in the responses to this survey may also result in maintaining the social status quo, but they diverge from the conservative guidance approach in intention. The motivation of the career practitioners described here was to support their clients to fulfilling career choices, and practitioners' focus was on the identity and job satisfaction of each individual client. Their practice appeared to be grounded in the assumptions set out by Ibarra (2005) which conceptualises career as identity and career decisions as decisions about social identities. In other word practitioners were advocating the importance of identity fit (Schneider, 1987) because it was likely to make clients happier and more congruent with their identity rather than because it was good for employers or wider considerations of social harmony.

In contrast to radical and conservative ideologies, liberal approaches to guidance stress the primacy of client perspectives and agendas in the interactions between professionals and their clients. Such approaches emphasise non-directivity and argue that careers workers should take a client-centred approach (Ali and Graham, 1996). Non-directivity is a strategy which many participants in this study

indicated that they use to help them to manage these potentially tricky conversations about career image. The career literature tends to adopt a Rogerian interpretation of non-directivity (Rogers, 1967). At the heart of Rogers's non-directivity principle is the notion of self-actualisation, the belief that we are all intrinsically motivated to change, grow and develop. Rogers theorised this as a biological tendency, not a moral imperative. The role of a Rogerian non-directive practitioner is to help clients to identify the factors which might be preventing this growth and to support them to generate their own solutions: advice and suggestion from the practitioner are not relevant because the answers can only be found within the individual.

Career practitioners used the language of liberal guidance when responding to our survey, as one practitioner commented, *'I would always use guidance / coaching techniques to get them to come up with the answers'*. They discussed client-centredness (**values**), adopting a stance of *'unconditional positive regard'* (**interpersonal skills**) and most critically using non-directive approaches (**non-directivity**). However, on closer examination it was clear that while participating career practitioners were using the language of non-directivity some were not using this in the Rogerian sense.

Grant (1989) drew a distinction between principled non-directivity and instrumental non-directivity. While principled non-directivity reflects the Rogerian philosophical definition of non-directivity, instrumental non-directivity views non-directivity as a tool. The practitioners in this study were generally not advocating non-directivity as a philosophical position. Rather they were using non-directivity as a practical strategy to enable them to raise a difficult topic with a client: *'I would only truly feel comfortable [...] if the client raised it first'*. Non-directivity was described as a practical strategy used as a means of depersonalising the topic and shifting the judgement and the identification of both problem and solution from the practitioner to the client. The idea that some practitioners were using instrumental rather than principled non-directivity is further supported by the fact that this approach was often combined with techniques more clearly at odds with a Rogerian approach to non-directivity. Practitioners for example, were comfortable providing external data (employers' views or research studies) which highlights the importance of career image, as a way to frame and ultimately direct individuals' thinking along particular lines, as an alternative to a non-directive approach: *'the discussion can be done in many ways, i.e. by the client leading on what aspects are important or by handouts on the industry etc.'*

It is therefore possible to conclude that while practitioners drew on the language of liberal guidance, some of the practice described was not wholly within this tradition. Practitioners made these choices because they were keen to provide their clients with the tools that they believed that they would need to successfully pursue their career but their belief that clients might benefit from this kind of external input indicates that non-directivity was not wholly espoused as a philosophical position.

The progressive ideology was the one which was represented most strongly in the data. As with liberal approaches, the progressive ideology focuses on the individual but whilst liberal approaches encourage the individual to identify their own choices, progressive approaches actively encourage the individual to make the changes they need to in order to succeed within the societal structures around them: *'it is about explaining how to fit into a specific "role" better'*.

Career practitioners articulated the progressive approach most consistently in their discussion of career image in the survey. They were keen to stress that they were acting in the best interests of their clients (**values**) but saw their role as helping individuals to understand the social rules and to

respond to them by looking, dressing and behaving appropriately (*beliefs about career image*). Many of the tools and strategies described by practitioners were designed to help their clients to decode what employers want and to empower them to respond to this in ways that would advantage them (*element of career image, anticipated outcome, depersonalisation*).

Although focused on helping their clients, some practitioners retained a level of critique about the importance attached to career image. To many, the importance of career image is distasteful but undeniable, as one of the practitioners commented '*it shouldn't matter but we live in the real world and it does*'. Practitioners sought to challenge these societal inequalities by demystifying them and empowering their clients to respond to them. However, they did not generally seek to actively challenge the structures or assumptions of society in the way that radical guidance might.

The analysis of the responses through the lens of Watts's framework of ideological approaches to guidance foregrounds the role of the practitioners in this survey as one which supports the needs of each client, rather than as one which promotes social change. Watts has commented that the focus on the individual, which we have noted here, is 'understandable since at the point of intervention the focus of attention is the individual' (Watts, 2015 p.172), but reflecting on these approaches in the light of this framework highlights the implications of the practitioner choices. Practice which focuses exclusively on the needs of the individual client fails to challenge the existing social structures. Raising awareness of the approaches that practitioners are taking to career image and discussing the ideologies and approaches that underpin this may help career practice to move towards a more ethical, theorised and effective way of addressing career image.

### ***Recommendations for practice***

The data showed clearly that there exists substantial and significant practice within the arena of career image but indicates that career practitioners may be developing their practice frameworks and strategies in isolation. A more widely aired discourse on the topic of career image could lead to career practitioners having more confidence in their own boundaries and skills and ultimately to more effective and appropriate discussions with clients. Theory and practice could be incorporated into entry level training and CPD programmes for career practitioners. Practitioner efforts to effect social change may also more likely result from such open discourse and training.

## **Conclusion**

Previous literature has demonstrated that career image plays an important role in careers; this current study shows that it too plays an integral part in career practice.

The findings indicated that practitioners' personal perspectives on career image drew on their emotional responses, their values, and their beliefs about the role career image plays in the workplace. Their decisions about whether to and when to engage in conversations about the topic with clients were grounded in their judgement about whether the conversation would lead to a positive outcome for their clients, their own professional confidence and their professional boundaries. Practitioners demonstrated a range of strategies which they employed to help them to manage their conversations, including depersonalisation from the topic, interpersonal skills and non-directivity. The strategies seem to have been developed individually, within each practitioner's

practice, and it is argued that a stronger theoretical basis for practice and wider discussion of the issues might be of value to the profession. The practitioners here demonstrated a clear commitment to helping their clients to navigate the complex and subtle aesthetic requirements of the world of work notwithstanding their own discomfort with such personal discussions and distaste at the society which judges in this way. Whilst this approach clearly adds value to the individual client, further debate could explore how careers practitioners orientation to this issue relate to wider questions about the socio-political responsibilities and positioning of the profession.

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**Table 1 Demographic Information**

<b>Age Range</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Client Group</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Country of residence</b>	<b>%</b>
18 – 25	2	White	89	University students	34	England	72
26 – 30	3	Asian	3	Young people in schools	20	Scotland	4
31 – 40	26	Black / Africa / Caribbean	1.5	Working adults	20	N. Ireland	1
41 – 50	28	Mixed ethnic groups	2.5	College students	13	Wales	1
51 - 60	35	Other	1	Unemployed adults	9	Rest of Europe	7
61 - 70	4	Prefer not to say	3	Young people not in education employment or training	4	Rest of the World	15
70+	1					Prefer not to say	7

**Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-theme</b>
Personal Perspectives (137)*	Emotional response (53)
	Values (37)
	Beliefs about career image (47)
Decisions about practice (327)	Element of career image (34)
	Type of client (67)
	Anticipated outcome (92)
	Practitioner confidence / uncertainty (82)

	Professional boundaries (52)
Practitioner Strategies (155)	Depersonalisation (39)
	Interpersonal skills (69)
	Non-directivity (47)

\*Numbers in brackets represent the number of times this theme or sub-theme was coded