

why don't the poor listen to us?

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The 'on-er-bike' hypothesis of career management is back: if there's no work where you live, then live where there's work. We are, it says, a socially-stratified society because poor people are rooted: social mobility and geographic mobility are the same thing. With her childhood in a council-housing, Lynsey Hanley sees that rootedness as entrapping. Guardian journo Simon Jenkins agrees. So does Norman Tebbit's dad.

Then there's the 'eyes-wide-open' hypothesis. Who-gets-to-do-what will be more equitable when everybody can see what's available, and what it requires of them. That's why careers workers have data-bases for informing folk, and psychometrics for matching them.

The 'skill-up' hypothesis says train-up people for employability. Kenneth Baker - once as education-minister, now as entrepreneur - pushes vocational training. Baroness Walmsley is arguing that Personal Social and Health Education can also do it.

You'd think all of this would be enough to increase social mobility. And there are success stories, with some political support. But social mobility means helping most the people who most need help. And the systematic evidence is not impressive: a MORI poll (5) shows that we help the low-in-pecking-order least, and that they are least likely to seek our help.

So why is it that people who might move don't? That people who could do with some retraining won't? And that the people we're trying to help with that turn a deaf ear. Do we need a 'bloody-minded' career-management hypothesis?

We sometimes learn about career management from other-than-careers studies. And new evidence now comes from a dramatic example of that. It is of the impact of the Katrina hurricane on New Orleans. People in the poor areas were roundly criticised for not make the 'right' decision, and move out of flooded areas. Social scientist Nicole Stephens (6), with her colleagues, has probed what was going on in the hearts-and-minds of a more than four hundred of the survivors. She has opened up a new and useful perspective on why people do not take advice - and did not move out.

The poor learn to value their neighbours and to be self-reliant. They have few inter-city connections to call on, they have run-down vehicles, and if they make a mistake they stand to lose - not just a percentage of their wealth - everything. In those circumstances they hold on to people they know and can trust. Another of Nicole Stephens's teams (7) finds that working-class people value the familiar and stick to what is agreed to be acceptable to their group.

These attitudes may seem perverse and inadequate to people in a position to make choices. But the stressed and vulnerable need to balance what they must hold on to, against what they can afford to let go. And, from that point-of-view, holding on is a sensible weighing of risk. In the New Orleans of 2005 that was a big calculation, but it was not easy. And neither was it visible to the New Orleans well-heeled and well-connected. Choice works well for people in a position to choose. And, on that matter, the rich and the poor are strangers to each other.

And not just in the Big Easy. UK researcher Will Atkinson's (1) in-depth interviews - 55 people, 18-56, a cross-section - finds similar explanations of differences among rich and poor responses to opportunity. Some of it is plain and obvious: expenditure of energy and cash on schooling is weighed against other expenditure.

But there is more. Poverty is not just money, it is a way of living. Will Atkinson finds that people from working-class backgrounds are more likely to live close to where they grew up - with little interest in living elsewhere. When forced to look for other work, they are more likely to look for what is familiar - what they, and the people they know, are used to doing. And their conversations with the researcher are distinctive -

youngsters are grateful for the support of families, and they want to repay the sacrifice. There are fewer taken-for-granted assumptions along the lines 'I've worked hard, and I deserve my success'. There is a strong attachment to the people who helped.

Findings like these will not come as a surprise to anybody who has read Richard Hoggart's (3), Paul Willis's (9) or Howard Williamson's (8) conversations with the working classes. There is plenty of support there for a 'for-the-likes-of-us' career-management hypothesis. Community-interaction theory has recently updated thinking on how what people do about work is not wholly self-propelled by individual achievement. It is done - as much as anything - with, for, and in response to other people.

Nicole Stephens and Will Atkinson take that thinking further. They find a hidden layer of largely undeclared attitudes to stress and crisis. People are aware of their exposed position, are more likely to attribute their success to luck, and to the help of others. They talk less about just rewards.

It seems to me that - somewhere in that mix of declaration, silence and denial - there lie buried compelling beliefs, values and expectations. The beliefs are about how things work for us, the values about what is worth us trying, and the expectations about what is likely to come out of it for us. That rooted culture shapes what people do, whom they trust, and what they think there is some point in talking about - and listening to.

In cash-strapped conditions this isn't going to sort itself out. Stagnant economic conditions mean that every person's step-up is another's step-down. This is the 'zero-sum' career-management hypothesis. In that outworking we would pay more attention to significant potential, rather than to mere achievement, so that able working-class kids displace the not-so-bright offspring of the middle-classes.

Support for that would call for a change in social attitudes. We would all need to notice that we all have an interest in the success of other people's children. And we haven't noticed it yet - think of HE fees. So the people of New Orleans, Islington, Leeds and Glasgow remain strangers to each other. Alessandra Buonfino (2) has recently renewed interest in what Mary Douglas calls 'social enclaves': the people we rely on are increasingly likely to be allies made in neighbourhoods, networks and on-line - where we seek others like ourselves. It makes for the 'me-and-mine' hypothesis for career management. And it perpetuates social stratification by transmitting the beliefs, values and expectations of each generation to the next - in gated community and in ghetto. That is what brings about the 'excluded'. If Mary Douglas is right a more accurate term would be 'the abandoned'.

So what are the issues? A policy fix seems to be out-of-the-question - the length of a parliament is not long enough. So, on what time-line would conventional careers education and guidance be in any position to deliver on anything like the scale that equitability demands? If ever. If never, what kind of reform do we need? Community-interaction theory (4) suggests horizon-broadening strategies - but what kind of new starting points does the Stephens-Atkinson hypothesis now suggest?

Much of careers work driven by 'on-ye-bike', 'eyes-wide-open' and 'trained-up' thinking is designed to bring what people do closer to work. How do we now bring work closer to what people do?

references

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