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## Chapter 2

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### **Occupational career choice: accounts and contradictions**

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This chapter looks at the application of discourse analysis to the study of occupational-choice accounts. The utility of this approach will be demonstrated through an examination of vocational undergraduates' responses on being interviewed about their course and related occupational choices. The analysis of these responses is located within an attempt to provide an empirically demonstrable critique of traditional psychological approaches to the study of occupational choice. These traditional approaches have sought to use respondents' answers as a means of revealing underlying psychological structures or processes which govern occupational choice. Discourse analysis does not attempt to reveal psychological universals but rather is concerned with the social context in which responses are generated and, in the case of interviews, the interactive functions they may serve (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

There have been two main psychological approaches to the study of occupational choice. The 'personality-matching' approach has primarily relied upon psychometric testing in order to predict occupational choice on the basis of personality assessments. Foremost amongst those taking this approach has been Holland (1959, 1985) who has formulated a personality typology based on preferences for particular kinds of work. Six types are specified in terms of work-related interests and aversions. Realistic types are said to prefer working with objects and machines and do not like educational or therapeutic activities. Investigative types value systematic study, usually of a scientific nature, and do not like working on repetitive tasks or in situations where they must deal with others. Artistic types are said to value activities which are creative, and to have an aversion for systematic or fixed kinds of work. Social types prefer to work with people and do not like tasks involving machines or tools. Enterprising types like [18] to work in situations where they can persuade or manipulate others and do not like investigative activities. And finally, conventional types are said to prefer working with records or data and to have an aversion for free, unsystematic activities. 'Personality patterns' represent particular combinations of the six basic personality types and are expressed in terms of a two- or three-type code. A person is said to be consistent if the elements of his or her subtype share common characteristics, and inconsistent if they are conflicting. 'Subtypes' represent the personality patterns that are prevalent in particular occupations.

The second main approach is the 'developmental' approach which has primarily used interview responses to identify stages in the maturation of vocational thinking. Accordingly, occupational choice is viewed as a process which takes place over several years, the underlying theme of which is the maturation of our capacity for 'realistic' (i.e. rational) occupational

decision-making. In the first comprehensive theory of this kind (Ginzberg *et al*, 1951) three stages were specified: (i) the fantasy stage (from approximately 6 to 11 years of age) during which children express their occupational preferences in terms of those occupations which seem glamorous or adventuresome; (ii) the tentative stage (from approximately 11 to 17 years of age) during which there is a growing awareness of both internal (e.g. interests and abilities) and external (e.g. employment opportunities) factors that will affect the outcome; and (iii) the realistic stage (17 years of age and over) during which stock is taken of past decisions and particular occupational fields are investigated leading to a commitment to aim for a specific kind of job.

Another important researcher in this area (Super, 1957) has also formulated developmental stages which emphasize the development of an individual's work-related self-concept across the life span. One of his main contribution has been the Identification of 'developmental tasks' related to vocational development and his notion of an individual's 'vocational maturity' (i.e. the rate and progress made towards 'realistic' occupational decision-making).

Now that we have some purchase on the traditional psychological approaches, in the next section we will turn to looking at the alternative discourse-analytic perspective to the studying of occupational choice accounts.

## **INVESTIGATING OCCUPATIONAL-CHOICE DISCOURSE**

If the interactive nature of interview dialogue becomes the focus [19] of study, then one must give up attempts to view responses as indicative of certain types of 'occupational personality' or as revealing a respondent's stage of 'vocational maturity'. Instead, the central question becomes: How do respondents attempt to produce coherent and credible accounts of their occupational choices? In order to accomplish this analytic task we must look at the kind of accounting practices used to justify occupational choices. In other words, we must look at what Potter and Wetherell (1987) refer to as the 'linguistic repertoires' which respondents draw upon. In this context these repertoires can be thought of as the broad kinds of account that respondents draw upon when talking about their course and related occupational choices.

It is important to note here that responses are not viewed as revealing respondents' 'real' reasons for choosing particular occupations. As Garfinkel (1967) argues, we account for our decisions in a retrospective manner. As such, decision-making may have little to do with electing a course of action on the basis of available information but rather may be the product of our ability to define the basis for decisions once made. This type of accounting can therefore be viewed as justifying a course of action and involves 'assigning outcomes their legitimate history' (Garfinkel, 1967:114). Interview responses are therefore viewed in terms of discursive practices. The extent to which certain types of accounts are regarded as credible will depend upon the way in which respondents interpret the interviewer's questions and also the way in which the interviewer receives their responses. The ways in which respondents attempt to understand what the interviewer is 'looking for' can be approached from a conversation analytic viewpoint. From this perspective the interview can be thought of as a series of question-and-answer sequences (cf. Sacks, 1972). These exchanges are usually under the control of the interviewer who can use respondents' answers to generate further questions. Respondents must therefore attempt to gauge the direction and import of questions in the course of hearing them and be responsive to the interviewer's line of questioning.

An analysis of question-and-answer sequences in interviews allows the researcher to see the

way in which the language game is played back and forth until a point is reached where the interviewer regards a particular question topic as having been answered satisfactorily. This can be achieved by noting when new question topics are initiated. In other words, it is possible to look at the success or failure [20] of particular linguistic repertoires by examining the extent to which the interviewer pursues a respondent's initial answer to a question topic and the extent to which the interview runs 'smoothly'.

The analysis of interview transcripts in this chapter was based on a study involving forty vocational students from two degree courses at Dundee Institute of Technology: mechanical engineering and nursing undergraduates. These groups were selected because: (i) their course choice represents a choice of a specific occupational domain; and (ii) conventionally, they are thought of as attracting very different individuals, thereby allowing for the contrast of different linguistic resources with regard to 'personality-expressive' discourse.

The interviews were conducted using an interview schedule and were tape-recorded. The transcription of this material stresses readability and does not feature, for example, intonation or pause lengths. Such a detailed level of transcription was not necessary given that the analytic focus was directed at the content of the linguistic repertoires drawn upon by respondents. The transcripts are coded, for example: 1NRS3 represents year 1, nursing, respondent number 3; and 5ME9 represents year 5, mechanical engineering, respondent number 9. Where the tape recording could not be heard clearly this is shown in the transcript as (inaud.).

### **Personality-expressive' accounts**

#### *Looking for personality types*

According to the 'Occupations Finder' in Holland (1985), mechanical engineering comes under the category of 'realistic' occupations. It is therefore said to attract people who primarily perceive themselves as having practical abilities and a preference for working with objects and machines rather than people. Realistic types are also said to be materialistic, valuing money, power and status. The particular subtype for this occupation is specified as 'realistic, investigative, enterprising'. The investigative element being of secondary importance is associated with a preference for intellectual work and an interest in science. The enterprising element is what Holland refers to as the tertiary element of this particular personality profile, and is associated with a preference for work where leadership or an ability to influence others is required, as in managerial or sales positions.

General nursing comes under the category of 'social' occupations. It is therefore said to attract people who primarily perceive themselves [21] as having interpersonal skills and an aversion for systematic, ordered work involving objects or machines. The particular subtype for the occupation of general nurse is specified as 'social, investigative, artistic'. 'Investigative' is the secondary element of this subtype, implying the preferences mentioned above whilst the artistic element refers to a preference for unstructured creative activities and an aversion for systematic work (as is found in 'conventional' occupations, e.g. a clerk).

The following extracts show typical responses which appear to accord with Holland's typology for these occupations.

5ME9 (male, 23)

*Int:* Why did you want to enter the field of mechanical engineering?

*Resp:* Well, it just started off from being an interest when I was young, making models from *Meccano* kits and mechanical subjects at school, I quite enjoyed them. I enjoyed the physics, maths side of it. I wasn't certain I wanted to do mechanical; there's civil, electrical and chemical. I just had a look around and decided to come to the mechanical course.

INRS7 (female, 17)

*Int:* Why do you want to go into the field of nursing?

*Resp:* I think it will be a well worth job, I'll get a lot of job satisfaction from it and every day is going to be different, it's not going to be boring. And getting to know more people and helping them, feeling that you're doing something at the end of the day, it's not just wasted really.

The mechanical engineering respondent (5ME9) traces his choice back to an interest in construction kits and 'mechanical subjects at school'. This appears to indicate a preference for 'realistic' activities. He then goes on to mention that he enjoyed physics and maths, that is, 'investigative' subjects. This response therefore appears to reveal the first two elements of the mechanical engineer subtype. In contrast the nursing respondent (1 NRS7) expresses a preference for working with people and helping them, and for variety of work. This response appears to correspond to the 'social' and 'artistic' elements of the nurse subtype.

*Conversational complexities: disappearing types*

Although it was possible to select responses which seemed to offer support for Holland's personality types for these occupations, it [22] became evident that this could only be achieved by ignoring the complex conversational context of such responses. When this was examined, mismatches between responses and the typology were revealed and categorization often became problematic. Indeed it can be said that the 'types' tended to disappear into the discursive fabric weaved by researcher and respondent.

As the following respondent's answers show, variability of response can undermine attempts to apply Holland's apparently straightforward categorizations.

5ME10 (male, 25)

(1)

*Int:* Why did you want to enter the field of mechanical engineering?

*Resp:* Well it's a subject, engineering as a whole is a subject that I've been interested in since a child, building things, seeing how things work, taking things apart. And also there's the influence of my parents, my father's an architect and also my grandfather's an engineer, so there's a sort of family thing. So no matter how much you try to get away from it you are influenced by what your parents do. But generally from an early age I was interested in machines and it stemmed from there.

(2)

*Int:* How did you arrive at your particular decision to aim for this occupation?

*Resp:* Em, well funnily enough I did a year of architecture before starting here. I was always

interested in building something, design, that sort of area, construction. So I tried architecture and discovered that midway through that year I wasn't interested in it. So I completed the year and came here.

In extract (1) the respondent links an interest in practical activities he engaged in as a child ('building things' and 'taking things apart') with an interest in machines. This appears to be a straightforward instance of a 'realistic' personality type. However, in extract (2) the same interest is associated with design and his earlier choice of architecture. 'Building things' and 'construction' are now associated with an interest in buildings. Yet Holland classifies architecture under 'artistic' occupations, a type which is unrelated to engineering! Had a brief structured interview or questionnaire been used to explore respondents' views of their occupational choices this 'qualification' might not have emerged. However, the conversational nature of the interview reveals [23] a complex account of occupational choice which is not easily reduced to Holland's discrete categories.

#### *'Personality traits' and membership categories*

I have pointed out that some responses on the face of it appear to offer a degree of support for Holland's view that personality directs occupational choice. The mechanical engineering and nursing respondents did after all refer to very different kinds of reasons for their choices. Mechanical engineering students tended to mention a preference for working with machines and an interest in maths and physics at school as the basis for their choice, whereas the nursing students tended to mention a preference for working with people and helping them. It could therefore be argued that underlying personality traits are revealed by these very different kinds of account. However, an alternative perspective emerges when we consider the production of these accounts as fulfilling an interactive function.

One way of investigating connections between occupations and personality traits is to consider these as the articulation of our conventional knowledge of membership categories (Sacks, 1972, 1974). It must be stressed that these categories, although stocks of conventional knowledge, are nevertheless linguistic devices used in the accomplishment of meaning-making and deployed by speakers for specific purposes (i.e. linguistic repertoires). So why do respondents draw upon these standard membership categorizations when talking about their choice of occupation rather than a specialized knowledge? An answer to this question can be found by looking at differences in the sequences of talk between those who use these kind of responses early on in the interview and those who do not. Consider the following pair of extracts.

5ME9 (male, 23)

*Int:* Why did you want to enter the field of mechanical engineering?

*Resp:* Well, it just started off from being an interest when I was young making models from *Meccano* kits and mechanical subjects at school, I quite enjoyed them, I enjoyed the physics, maths side of it. I wasn't certain I wanted to do mechanical engineering, there's civil, electrical and chemical. I just had a look around and decided to come to the mechanical course (inaud: several secs). [24]

*Int:* Do you think there are any particular qualities required to be a mechanical engineer?

NRS7 (female, 17)

*Int:* Why do you want to go into the field of nursing?

*Resp:* I think it will be a well worth job, I'd get a lot of job satisfaction from it, and every day is going to be different, it's not going to be boring. And getting to know more people and helping them, feeling that you're doing something at the end of the day, it's not just wasted really.

*Int:* What drew you to nursing? You could speak to people in other jobs, why nursing?

*Resp:* Because you're helping them, they're not able to do something themselves so then you've - without being there they would have a harder time even though maybe they're not ill, just to speak to you and understand how they feel or if they are ill to get them through that stage.

*Int:* Did you consider any other careers?

These extracts are examples of the 'standard membership category repertoire' for choosing these occupations. Respondent 5ME9 mentions the 'realistic' and 'investigative' elements of the mechanical engineer subtype: an interest in construction kits and mechanical subjects at school, and an interest in science. Note how once this response is given, the interviewer begins a new question topic. Two question-and-answer turns are required to establish the 'social' and 'artistic' characteristics of respondent 1NRS7. Her first answer stresses the importance she attaches to working with people, and for variety of work. The interviewer asks her to be more specific and she obliges by elaborating about helping people. The interviewer moves on to another question topic after this response, thereby indicating that it is satisfactory.

These short conversational exchanges can be contrasted with the protracted question-and-answer sequences of the following extracts which draw upon the 'family influence repertoire' of accounting for occupational choice.

5ME2 (male, 21)

*Int:* Why did you want to enter the field of mechanical engineering?

*Resp:* Well, my brothers all did engineering so I was kind of led onto that when I left school and I had been brought up to go along (inaud.). I'd always been interested in engineering, cars and motorbikes and stuff like that so it was just [25] there wasn't any other option and I just went straight into it. I wasn't really thinking career-wise what particular area I wanted to go into, it was more or less it was engineering or nothing else.

*Int:* When you say there was nothing else, why did that arise then? Did they talk to you, or did you feel this was the right area for you?

*Resp:* Well, it was the right area for me anyway and I'd thought of other careers, you know you go through the range of them and engineering seemed to be the only reasonable one because I took to it quite naturally, with machinery and stuff like that, so I thought I'd may as well just continue in that line rather than tackling something else and finding that I wasn't cut out for it.

*Int:* Did your brothers tell you what it was about?

*Resp:* Well I had a fair idea. I realize now that I was a wee bit limited in my knowledge of what it covered, the whole range of subjects it covered, you know, thermodynamics and that sort of stuff. And most of the subjects aren't that interesting, there's only a few specialist subjects that I find interesting. But if I had done something different, say civil or electrical or something like that, I knew that I wouldn't be as happy as I am just now

because I don't find electrical that interesting and difficult to understand; similar with civil. So if I had to choose now I would have still made the same choice.

*Int:* What is it that draws you to mechanical as opposed to electrical or civil?

*Resp:* Well when I was younger my brothers always had some kind of machinery. There was motorbikes and cars and engines and stuff like that which I took to quite readily. Very little electrical work came into it or structural work and I'd always felt it easier on the mathematical side of the subjects in school, the physical sciences rather than the other subjects, you know, literature or things like that.

*Int:* When you say working with machines, motorbikes and cars, is that mechanics then?

INRS8 (female, 19)

*Int:* Why do you want to enter the field of nursing?

*Resp:* 'Cause I've always had an interest in it from when I was [26] young (inaud.). My mum had been a nurse and I have lots of relatives who are nurses and they all sort of; not influenced, but I was always interested in what they had to say about their work. And I just like being with people but I didn't want to be stuck in an office and didn't want to be stuck in a shop or anything 'cause I've worked in a shop and I know what it's like, it's alright doing it part-time but it's not for me to be able to enjoy it. And, I just wanted to be a nurse 'cause I like people, that's the main reason.

*Int:* You say there's people in your family who are nurses. Did they influence you, did they talk to you?

*Resp:* When they'd come home they'd talk about their work and things like that, that's more or less it and that's it I said I was going to be a nurse and no arguing about it. I think mum was a bit surprised 'cause I'd never said anything when I was younger, that I wanted to be a nurse cause usually you say you want to be something when you grow up and it changes every week but with me it's that I've always wanted to be a nurse and I think she was surprised that I was going through with it.

*Int:* When you say you've always wanted to be a nurse what is it then that has attracted you to this area? You say you like working with people but I could give you many jobs where you would be working with people, why specifically nursing?

*Resp:* It's more personal with the person being a nurse, it's not sort of working on a shop counter and saying 'that's £50 please!' That person means nothing to you. And I know you're not meant to get personally involved with your patients but you still have an interest in them whereas other jobs (inaud.) to me, maybe you are, maybe other people think different but to me you're really interested in the person.

*Int:* But I could give you a job where you're interested in people, let's say a school teacher or lecturer. Now there you have an interest in your pupils or students, you're talking to people, you're helping them learn. I'm interested in why you want to do nursing, I mean you've mentioned your relatives and it would seem to me that they held sway with you, a great influence on you.

*Resp:* Well, teaching for a start wouldn't be for me because I couldn't stand up and tell them (inaud.), it's not for me. [27] Em, I've thought about all them things but I've always sort of swayed towards nursing.

*Int:* What other careers did you think about?

Respondent 5ME2 begins by talking about the influence of his brothers who had taken up

engineering before him. Respondent I NRS8 points out that her mother as well as her other relatives are involved in nursing. In both interviews the interviewer pursues the extent to which the respondents were influenced in their choices. In both cases the respondents detect the import of this questioning and respond by referring to their long-standing interest in their intended occupations. In answering this question, respondent 5ME2 claims that he had ‘thought of other careers’ thus contradicting what he had said in his initial response that ‘there wasn’t any other option ... it was more or less engineering or nothing else’. Thus, external influences on his choice are played down and he now appears to have made a considered decision. He is then able to refer to his interest in machines as the deciding factor in his choice. At this stage respondent I NRS8 still refers to her family members who would ‘talk about their work’ but is careful to point out that it was she who decided upon nursing (‘I said I was going to be a nurse and no arguing about it’ ... ‘I’ve always wanted to be a nurse’).

Despite these responses which refer to the independent nature of the respondents’ choices, they are pursued further about the nature of their decisions. After being asked about the information he received from his brothers, respondent 5ME2 is asked about the specific branch of engineering he chose to enter. It is at this point that he draws upon the ‘standard membership category repertoire’. Thus, he again refers to his experience of working with machines but also adds that he was interested in physics and maths at school. In the interview with respondent I NRS8 the interviewer challenges her to be more specific about her choice of nursing by providing other examples of occupations that involve working closely with people. However, unlike the engineering respondent she does not refer to any interests or preferences ‘characteristic’ of nurses but answers the question in a direct manner by providing a reason why she is unsuitable for teaching. She then reiterates her long-standing interest in nursing. In both cases the interviewer gives up the line of questioning and moves on to another topic.

From this analysis we can see that the justification of occupational choice in terms of a ‘standard membership category repertoire’ is [28] more readily accepted by the interviewer than a ‘family influence repertoire’. Furthermore, an account which although referring to the independence of the decision made is nevertheless still probed further to elicit the basis of the choice, that is, the ‘personality’ of the individual. Respondents who therefore ‘collude’ with the interviewer and refer to characteristics they possess conventionally associated with their chosen occupation establish their suitability for such work, whereas respondents who refer to the influence of others in their choice, what has been called the ‘family influence repertoire’, leave this to be established. It is therefore no wonder that the majority of respondents justify their occupational choices using the ‘standard membership category repertoire’; conversationally, it is much easier and leads to a ‘smooth’ interview.

## **Looking at ‘developmental’ discourse in dialogue**

### *The maintenance of ‘realistic’ accounts*

Respondents were often asked ‘follow-up’ questions, particularly on the basis of their responses to the opening question. This in effect set respondents the task of attempting to maintain their choices as ‘realistic’ across succeeding question-and-answer turns. Thus, choice realism can be viewed as a construction which emerges and is maintained through the question-and-answer sequences of the interview. This can be illustrated through the analysis of the following extract involving a mechanical engineering student.

IME6 (male, 17)

*Int:* Why do you want to enter the field of mechanical engineering?

*Resp:* Because I think it strongly relates to the subject I'm best at, physics. I've always enjoyed this kind of work, maybe not exactly the same thing, but working on cars, motorbikes and things. It's a slightly higher that's all.

*Int:* When you say you enjoy working with cars and motorbikes is this a hobby?

*Resp:* Yeah, more of a hobby.

*Int:* And what sort of things do you do then?

*Resp:* Eh, just (inaud.) some cars and things, just basically help my dad service the car.

*Int:* Yeah, but I could say then that is surely being more of a mechanic than a mechanical engineer. [29]

*Resp:* I realize that but I'm maybe slightly more intelligent, more able to become a mechanical engineer as opposed to a time-served mechanic.

*Int:* Do you see any difference between what a mechanic does (*Resp:* Oh yeah) and a mechanical engineer? What is the main difference then?

*Resp:* Well a mechanic is more using his hands to repair whereas a mechanical engineer might possibly design as opposed to repair.

*Int:* Is this an area you're interested in, design?

*Resp:* Yes, that's what I put on my application form. I hope to go into design at the end of the five years, if I get five years.

*Int:* You say you're interested in physics, why then not take up a career involving physics?

*Resp:* I'm not that deeply into the subject, I always like to broaden my horizons, not get narrow-minded into physics. I did consider doing physics certainly, but I feel this is the better subject to do.

In his answer to the opening question Respondent 1ME6 refers to his ability in physics which he points out is related to mechanical engineering. In the remainder of his answer he links mechanical engineering with 'working on cars and motorbikes and things' although he claims the former is at 'at a slightly higher level'. His claim to have 'always enjoyed this kind of work' would appear to perform a similar function to that mentioned in the previous section, namely to demonstrate through a long-standing interest, his vocational commitment and suitability for the job. Indeed, the nature of this interest is checked upon by the interviewer's next two questions and the respondent's answers would appear to confirm the impression of his choice as arising out of his mechanical interests.

However, the interviewer subsequently throws a metaphorical spanner in the works by challenging the respondent to distinguish the sort of work he has mentioned and that of being a mechanical engineer. The respondent then justifies his mechanical engineering choice by claiming that he is 'maybe slightly more intelligent' than what is required for a 'time-served mechanic' training. The interviewer's next question shows that he regards the respondent's answer as either incomplete or vague since he rephrases the challenge, this time as a direct question requiring the respondent to distinguish between the two. At this point the respondent differentiates the [30] two occupations in terms of 'repair and design'. The interviewer then picks up on the respondent's reference to design work and the respondent substantiates his interest in this aspect of engineering by mentioning he had put down an interest in this kind of work on his application form. The next question shifts the conversation back to the respondent's

declared interest in physics and challenges him to provide a rationale for choosing mechanical engineering over a career more directly concerned with physics. The respondent now plays down his interest in this discipline by claiming that he is not 'that deeply into the subject' and that he does not want to be 'narrow-minded'.

By unravelling the nature of the dialogue between interviewer and respondent we can see how the appearance of 'realistic-stage' discourse has been sustained. This involved a number of qualifications and variations in the description of his choice, but over a sequence of turns different responses achieve a coherent overall impression of rational decision making.

### *'Fantasy stage' responses as functional*

Although all of the interviews were dominated by 'realistic-stage' responses there were cases where respondents also talked in a manner that could be categorized as revealing 'fantasy-stage' thinking. From a developmental perspective this causes something of a problem as it undermines the hypothesis of normative age-graded vocational thinking and of distinct developmental stages. However, an examination of the conversational context in which these responses were given again provides an alternative explanation.

An example of this can be seen in the answers given by several of the nursing respondents who claimed that they had 'always' wanted to be a nurse or had done so from an early age.

1NRS8 (female, 19)

*Resp:* . . usually you say you want to be something when you grow up and it changes every week but with me it's that I've always wanted to be a nurse ....

*Int:* What other careers did you think about?

*Resp:* Em, other jobs in hospitals.

*Int:* Such as?

*Resp:* Radiography, then I thought I don't have physics so I put that out of it. And then there's occupational therapy and [31] physiotherapy and I thought no, I want more personal contact with the patient rather than in and out really.

4NR53 (female, 21)

*Int:* When you say you always wanted to do that, was there any particular reason for that? Was there anyone in your family

*Resp:* No, em well I've got a couple of cousins and things that are nurses but not really very many. But I think when you say you're always wanting to be an air hostess, and a teacher, and a nurse, and I just never got away from that . .

The claim 'I've always wanted to be a nurse can be thought of as a useful way of establishing a respondent's vocational commitment in an occupation that is commonly associated with dedication and the ideal of service. However, when faced with a question which appears to demand a 'realistic-stage' answer, respondent INRS8 obliges by referring to occupations she claims to have considered along with her reasons for rejecting them in favour of nursing. There is no conversational contradiction here. The respondent successfully communicates commitment and rationality.

Responses like those above make it difficult to assume that an underlying mental capacity (i.e. 'realistic' thinking) is responsible for occupational choice. Rather, it is the ability to meet

the demands of the interviewer's questions and present one's choice in a credible manner that is being displayed.

## CONCLUSIONS

It was noted that a fundamental assumption underlying the psychological approaches is that respondents' answers, whether in the form of psychometric test responses (the mainstay of the personality-matching approach) or interview responses (the mainstay of the developmental approach) can be used as the basis for respectively categorizing personality types and levels of vocational maturity. I have argued that 'personality-expressive' and 'realistic' accounts are a product of accounting for occupational choice, that is, they are discursive practices. I have also argued that some linguistic repertoires (e.g. the 'standard membership category repertoire') are more successful than others (e.g. the 'family influence repertoire') in terms of their persuasiveness in establishing a respondent's suitability for [32] a particular occupation. The linguistic repertoires which interviewees draw upon are therefore a key consideration in the production of a convincing account. This point will be developed later with respect to careers guidance.

An alternative approach to the study of occupational choice accounts has therefore been demonstrated; one which examines the influence of the interactive context on the way respondents construct their answers. This perspective enables an examination of the functions respondents' answers serve and allows the researcher to study the whole conversational pattern of the interview transcript and not just those parts which can be extracted and categorized according to a particular theoretical framework. Thus, we have seen how some responses simply do not fit with Holland's personality typology and how respondents can also draw upon 'fantasy' as well as 'realistic-stage' responses. In effect, these difficulties to cope adequately with the conversational context in which responses are generated calls into question the psychological reality which these theories purport to describe. They may be based on results which are artifactual due to the decontextualized manner in which they are analysed.

It is important to note that the kinds of response that have been looked at in this chapter were not produced as a result of attempts to elicit them through prior theorizing before students were interviewed. The questions asked of students were drawn from the researcher's own unexplicated common-sense notions about what should be asked in exploring course and related occupational choices. It was only as a result of analysing the question-and-answer sequences in the transcripts that these notions were exposed and called into question. These notions are of course reflected and formalized in the two main psychological perspectives on occupational choice. It is also important to note that no claim is being made that the analyses that have been offered are the only interpretations that are possible. Potter and Wetherell (1987) point out that a major advantage of discourse analysis is that the presentation of transcripts along with the analytic claims affords the reader the opportunity to evaluate those claims. Whether or not one agrees with these claims, the focus remains on discursive functions and the common-sense assumptions which underpin the dialogue.

The personality-matching and developmental approaches to occupational choice have had an important influence on careers guidance. Guidance based on the 'appropriate-personality' view [33] attempts to match individual attributes to what are regarded as appropriate occupations. This type of guidance usually operates with clients who are faced with imminent career decisions. The techniques used can vary but there is generally a reliance upon psychometric measurements. The

developmental approach to guidance is more long term and is aimed at facilitating 'vocational maturity'. Much emphasis is placed upon the notion of careers education and counselling clients through interviews in order to help clients attain 'realistic-stage' decision making. However, if we are concerned with the interactive nature of interview dialogue, then it can be argued that a central concern of those involved in careers guidance should be equipping clients with the conversational skills required for employment interviews. A conversational-skills approach to career preparation, focusing upon the practice of those linguistic repertoires found to be successful in interviews, would also have the advantage of recognizing the agency (rather than the 'personality' or 'maturational' limitations) of candidates. Responses could be practised in a role-play situation and audio and video feedback techniques could be used to confront clients with their shortcomings.

Some advice for interviewees on bringing off successful occupational-choice accounts can be given based on the analysis of the transcript extracts of this chapter. In general, interviewees should establish early on their suitability for their chosen occupation using the 'standard membership category repertoire'. It is also important that interviewees 'collude' with the interviewer so as to produce a 'realistic' decision-making account. It is not possible to plan the deployment of these repertoires in interviews in any detailed way since they must be drawn upon to meet the demands of particular questions (cf. Suchman, 1987). However, it might be possible to provide interviewees with some practice in adapting these broad kinds of account. By this point the reader may be asking, will not this emphasis on learning to say the 'right thing' undermine the use of interviews as a means of selection? There is plenty of evidence pointing out the weaknesses of selecting personnel through interviewing (see, for example, Herriot, 1987). Despite this, interviews continue to be one of the main techniques of personnel selection. Perhaps this is because interviewers draw upon common-sense notions that interviewees' answers reveal something of their personality characteristics and motivations for applying for a particular post (or vocational course [34] in the case of course-selection interviews). If one abandons this assumption and instead views selection interviews in terms of discursive practices, then there can be no doubt that the adoption of such a perspective will lead, not only to a questioning of the use of selection interviews, but also of our faith in the 'reality' that there are 'personality types' which are best suited to particular occupations.

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