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Citation: Hooley, T. and Yates, J. (2015). 'If you look the part you'll get the job': should career professionals help clients to enhance their career image?. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 43(4), pp. 438-451. doi: 10.1080/03069885.2014.975676

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Link to published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2014.975676>

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|--------------|--|
| Item type | Article |
| Authors | Yates, Julia; Hooley, Tristram |
| Citation | Tristram Hooley & Julia Yates (2015) ‘If you look the part you’ll get the job’: should career professionals help clients to enhance their career image?, <i>British Journal of Guidance & Counselling</i> , 43:4, 438-451, DOI: 10.1080/03069885.2014.975676 |
| DOI | 10.1080/03069885.2014.975676 |
| Publisher | Taylor and Francis |
| Journal | <i>British Journal of Guidance & Counselling</i> |
| Rights | Archived with thanks to <i>British Journal of Guidance & Counselling</i> |
| Downloaded | 14-Feb-2017 14:42:10 |
| Link to item | http://hdl.handle.net/10545/611263 |

‘If you look the part you’ll get the job’: should career professionals help clients to enhance their career image?

Tristram Hooley and Julia Yates

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* on 10 Nov 2014.

It was originally published as: Tristram Hooley & Julia Yates (2015) ‘If you look the part you’ll get the job’: should career professionals help clients to enhance their career image?, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 43:4, 438-451, DOI: 10.1080/03069885.2014.975676

Abstract

This article presents a critical exploration of the role of career professionals in supporting people to reflect on and enhance their appearance, attractiveness and self-presentation (career image). The article is conceptual and based on a review of the broader literature on career success, appearance and attractiveness. It explores the evidence for a relationship between attractiveness and career, and the authors propose a conceptual framework in which career image is comprised of three elements (interpersonal skills, aesthetic presentation and beauty). The paper examines a possible role for career professionals in relation to this and then critically examines this role and concludes with the proposition of a research agenda in this area.

Keywords: attractiveness; beauty; professional ethics; career professionals; career development

Introduction

Attractiveness is not a universal absolute. There are cultural and personal preferences at play in any definition of beauty and such concepts also shift over time. Some traits, however, have emerged as near universal predictors of an individual’s beauty such as waist-to-hip ratio and facial symmetry (Toledano, 2013). A range of diverse features combine to render some attractive and whilst aspects of appearance such as facial beauty are usually determined at birth, others may be easier to develop or control. One’s overall degree of attractiveness is enhanced through clothing, make up, bearing and social skills. In contrast to the genetic lottery of facial beauty, each of these is a skill that one can acquire and perfecting the technique can have an impact on the way that the individual is perceived.

Catherine Hakim’s (2010) concept of ‘erotic capital’ goes beyond physical beauty to incorporate a range of other factors such as the ability to make the most of assets, to dress well, to remain fit and well presented, to utilise charm, to exhibit liveliness and to perform sexually. Such elements are frequently tightly intertwined and, it is hypothesised, may make a decisive impact on an individual’s career. Hakim’s concept of ‘erotic capital’ has been challenged and its explanatory power contested (see Green, 2013). This article draws on Hakim’s theories, but, proposes a simpler typology of factors pertaining specifically to the work and career arena. It also takes issue with Hakim’s proposition that erotic capital is an individual resource that is distinct from Bourdieu’s concepts of social, cultural and financial capital (1985 and 1993). The discussion in this paper will propose that rather than being a separate kind of capital, the elements of appearance that have an impact on career are bound up with, and may even be an outward symbol of social, cultural and financial capital.

Given the research on the impact of appearance and attractiveness in the workplace, one might imagine that career practitioners would engage professionally with these issues. Earlier writers on career such as Parsons (1909) and Rodger (1952) often afforded appearance an important role in their theories of career; however, the authors' experience of working with contemporary careers professionals, backed up by the absence of recent literature in this field suggests that many career professionals may not be comfortable with addressing these issues and that the topic is not fully in the profession's current field of vision. This article discusses careers professionals in broad terms, including career guidance practitioners, career coaches and career educators, and it is possible that many of the issues discussed may play out in different ways for different kinds of professionals working with different client groups. It is hoped that this diversity of experiences and approaches can be explored further in future research.

Careers practice has long recognised the importance of the effective presentation of self, both on paper and in person, with considerable effort devoted to helping individuals maximise the effectiveness of their CV or enhance their performance at interview. It is possible to recognise a number of components to this process of self-presentation that are particularly relevant to career development. Firstly, good self-presentation includes marshalling a range of inter-personal skills. The ability to build relationships, make appropriate eye contact, use humour effectively and read and respond to the tone and attitudes of others are all key components of self-presentation. Secondly there is a range of what could be described as aesthetic presentation skills for example the ability to dress well, not slouch, have well-combed hair, appropriate make-up and a polished appearance. Finally there is the area that is most usually associated with attractiveness research which relates to physical beauty.

The above summary suggests that the capacity to present oneself effectively in the context of career includes the three elements of interpersonal skill, aesthetic skill and beauty. Taken together we have adopted the term 'career image' to recognise the relationships that exist between these various concepts and to allow for collective discussion of them. This article begins with a review of the relevant research before exploring the potential roles that career professionals could play in this area. The paper will then outline a range of issues that might be considered in relation to arguments that career professionals should get involved in this area. Finally the article will conclude with a discussion of a possible research agenda in this area.

Career image: insights from research

Career image is comprised of three main sub-concepts: interpersonal skill, aesthetic skill and beauty. There is a considerable amount of research that has investigated each of these concepts. This section of the article will briefly review the literature in each of these areas as they apply to career development.

Most of the literature that is presented here discusses career image and its constituent concepts within the framework of western culture. Indeed it is strongly influenced by Anglo-American culture and practices. Given the way in which career image is culturally situated this is a considerable limitation. As will be discussed later there would be value in further research exploring the way that the concept is operationalised across a wider range of culture and how this might influence the way in which careers workers engaged with it.

Interpersonal skill

Interpersonal skills contribute to the way in which people are perceived and to their success within the labour market. In a meta-analysis of research into selection interviews, Huffcutt, Conway, Roth,

& Stone (2001) found that applied social skills were the second most assessed quality in all selection interviews, suggesting that skilled interactions are key to interview success. On top of social skills, our definition of interpersonal skills includes a range of verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Voices, for example, play their part in determining success at interview with employers linking a low pitched voice to a dominant character. The handshake too, within Western cultures, has an impact (Stewart, Dustin, Barrick, & Darnold, 2008) with interviewers inferring sociability, friendliness and dominance from a firm grip.

It is possible to argue that conceptions of effective 'interpersonal skills' are strongly influenced by the norms and values of the upper echelons of society. In some cases interpersonal skills demonstrate the performance of cultural capital. Rakic, Steffens and Mummendey (2011), for example, argue that those with 'standard' accents have an advantage in the job market over those with regional accents, through associations with prestige and social class. This inter-face between social class and conceptions of effective self-presentation will be returned to later in this paper.

Aesthetic presentation

How you dress and use other forms of adornment (make-up, jewellery, piercings etc.) are also important factors in shaping people's responses. It is possible to group these issues together under the term of aesthetic presentation to describe an individual's capacity to enhance their appearance through dress and other adornments.

The meanings bestowed on, implied by and inferred from clothing and fashion are complex. Fashion choices are symbols of social identity and are used by individuals to communicate a wealth of information about themselves and 'the values, hopes and beliefs of the social groups of which they are members' (Barnard, 2002, p.39). What we choose to wear to work is a badge of our membership of an occupational or organisational group as well as a statement of our individuality. Our choice of work attire is far more than simply a decision about whether to wear a black suit or a pink tie: every choice communicates an aspect of our occupational identity. Choice of clothing, hairstyle and accessories are all imbued with symbolic meanings which change rapidly, and as well as choosing a style that suits us, physically, and one that reflects an identity that we are comfortable with, we need to find a look that is appropriate to the particular role: suitable attire for a job interview as a media runner (a junior post in the TV production industry) would be considered highly inappropriate for a law trainee. Evidence shows us (Huffcutt et al., 2001) that employers select candidates whom they feel will fit in to the organisation, but they are also looking to recruit individuals who stand out (Parmentier, Fischer, & Reuber, 2013). Negotiating these choices is complex and individuals need to make decisions that send the right messages about their social and personal identities.

Beauty

Beauty offers benefits across a range of different employment contexts for both men and women (Baert & Decuyper, 2014; Comisso & Finkelstein, 2012). Physically attractive men and women have been found to have a better chance of securing a job interview, being offered a job, starting work on a higher salary, negotiating a salary increase, receiving a positive performance evaluation and getting promoted. Such findings about the impact of physical attractiveness are supported across a range of literature in the field (see Toledano, 2013). In addition to the more obvious benefits of social popularity and reward within the employment sphere there is also evidence that suggests that beauty is positively correlated with self-esteem. Beautiful people are treated better than their less attractive peers and this shapes their self-image and world view. Self-esteem in itself has been shown to confer great benefits both in getting jobs and in being successful in the

workplace (Songqi, Huang, & Mo, 2014), so those blessed with good looks and a winning smile have the advantages of high self-esteem in addition to the advantages bestowed on them by others' responses to their appearance.

Not all research, however, accepts that physical attractiveness is a universal boon. Evidence for a disadvantage of beauty comes from an experimental study in which Agthe, Spörrle, and Maner (2011) found that highly attractive people are likely to receive a positive reaction from the opposite sex but a negative reaction from the same sex during job hiring or university admissions procedures.

Much of the research in this field treats 'beauty' as a single construct, but there are studies that examine its components. One aspect of beauty that receives attention in the literature is that of weight. There is considerable evidence that suggests that people who are overweight find it more difficult to get jobs (Agerstrom & Rooth, 2011), to be promoted (Rudolph, Wells, Weller, & Baltes, 2009) and to gain pay increases (Judge & Cable, 2011).

Gender

The impact of different aspects of career image seems to be different in many cases for men and women. This is an important consideration for practitioners thinking about incorporating discussions on elements of appearance in their practice, both in terms of the ethical position of the career practitioners and in terms of understanding the complexities and subtleties of the evidence.

Gender differences can be seen in interpersonal skills, aesthetic presentation and beauty. An example of interpersonal skills being interpreted differently is the handshake. A firm handshake creates a positive impression at interview but evidence suggests (Stewart et al., 2008) that the impact is stronger for women than for men, on the grounds that interviewers expect women to have weaker handshakes, so are particularly struck by a strong female grip.

Dress is particularly important to women at work because of differences in attitudes towards men's and women's appearance (Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, & Mackie-Lewis, 1997). Women are thought to be more sensitive to subtleties in dress because their dress codes are more complex. While many of the same issues exist for men and women relating to dress, women have to deal with a more complex series of decisions and a less clearly defined agreement of what constitutes appropriate career wear. Wolf (1991) argues that women who are in male-dominated arenas need to look attractive in order to be noticed at work, but must not be too attractive as this would lead to them being perceived as sex objects. Wolf's argument has been observed empirically for example in Tsetsura's (2012) study of Russian women in the public relations industry. Such decisions about appropriate dress and the active performance of attractiveness are highly dependent on the workplace and the role. Hazen and Syrdahl (2010) highlight the case of one woman who was fired for refusing to wear make-up and another who was fired for wearing too much make-up.

Dress codes often seek to either maximise attractiveness and/or the performance of sexuality, for example the provocative waitressing uniforms in the restaurant Hooters have been seen as exemplifying the ways in which young women's bodies are utilised in employment (Rasmusson, 2011) while Hooter's liability for harassment of the waitresses by customers has been debated in the legal literature (Rhee, 1997). Conversely they can aim to limit the performance of sexualised versions of career image in situations where this is judged to be inappropriate such as in schools or in workplaces where for example an attractive employee might be 'too distracting' for her, or occasionally his, colleagues (Hazen & Syrdahl, 2010). In terms of beauty, there is an 'attractiveness premium' for both men and women but the story is not the same for both groups. Men seem to gain more financially from career image overall (Frieze, Olson, & Russell, 1991), but different physical

attributes matter differentially to men and women. Women gain more financially from being a healthy weight (Judge & Cable, 2011), but height is more important to men financially, with taller men earning more than shorter men throughout their careers (Jæger, 2011).

Johnson, Podratz, Dipboye, and Gibbons (2010) identify what they describe as a 'beauty is beastly' effect for women in relation to jobs which are perceived to be masculine jobs and where physical appearance is unimportant; unattractive women, for example, were rated as more suitable for positions as construction supervisors or prison guards (masculine jobs where physical appearance is not thought to matter) than attractive women.

Why does career image confer such benefits?

In some sectors actively attending to your career image is central to the performance of the role. Consequently in some roles, elements of career image are used as explicit core criteria for hiring or for managing staff (Hazen & Syrdahl, 2010). This is obviously the case in the sex industry (Hakim, 2012; Voracek & Fisher, 2006) and in much of the entertainment industry (Dean, 2005). Nickson, Warhurst, and Dutton (2005) suggest that this is also the case in retail and hospitality. They note, for example, how requirements for attractiveness in the retail and hospitality industries are often signalled through the use of phrases like 'well-spoken' (interpersonal skill) or 'well turned-out' (aesthetic presentation) in job advertisements and policed through requirements to submit photos with job applications (beauty). For workers within these industries the performance of a career image which often highlights sexuality proves to be a central employability skill.

Further explanation for the advantages that are conveyed by career image can be found in the evidence that attractive people are consistently rated as more competent than their peers. The 'beauty is good' heuristic (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972) explains the widespread assumption that attractive people are skilled and talented. Employers hire attractive people not simply because they want to surround themselves with beauty, but because they associate attractiveness with job-related characteristics. Good inter-personal skills such as smiling and good eye contact, for example, might lead interviewers to assume an extravert personality (DeGroot & Gooty, 2009).

Strategies for enhancing career image as part of career building

The rewards for looking 'right' are high, and the penalties for getting it wrong are severe. However, the distinctions are subtle – choose a skirt an inch too short and it conveys the wrong message, but an inch too long and you may be missing the current trend. Before we address the issue of the potential role of career practitioners within this arena, let us briefly examine some of the processes and strategies that people adopt to learn how to present themselves appropriately.

People devote considerable time and energy to their appearance. Such investment serves a variety of purposes, but the idea of looking good for work and career is clearly amongst them. Smith, De Klerk, & Fletcher (2011) note that there is a substantial workplace fashion industry. They note that professional women spend a substantial amount of money on their career wear and highlight the fact that they are looking for career benefits from this investment. Such attention to personal appearance is sometimes referred to in the literature as 'aesthetic labour' suggesting that it takes effort as well as skill.

There is evidence that individuals use a range of strategies to learn about the appropriate dress code for their particular role. Rafaeli et al. (1997) asked employees in both management and administrative roles about their strategies for uncovering the unspoken dress code. They found that employees spent considerable time and energy working out what would be considered suitable.

Managers transferred notions of what was appropriate dress from their previous organisations, relied on spouses' advice, and learned through reading articles in relevant magazines about what to wear. Clerical staff learned through watching each other – observing what everyone else wore and then using that as a frame of reference for their shopping trips.

One source of advice is contained in self-help books, both those which focus exclusively on how to dress at work and those concerned with interview skills and preparation. There is no shortage of advice on how to dress and present oneself for an interview or for the workplace, with many relevant books providing information on this subject. Interviewees can find advice on aesthetic skills (dress and self-presentation) and on some more superficial elements of interpersonal skills, such as eye contact, smiling and body language, but advice on beauty is rarely seen.

The books often suggest a visit to an expert image consultant. However, research on the practice of such professionals is still emergent (Bryson & Wellington, 2003; Wellington & Bryson, 2001) and it not clear how such professionals relate to the employment sphere or where their practice might overlap with that of career professionals.

Theorising the acquisition of career image

Bourdieu's concepts of fields, capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1985, 1993) provide a useful framework for examining career image and particularly the issue of interpersonal skills and aesthetic presentation in the workplace. Bourdieu uses the term 'habitus' to describe the tacit rules of clothing, behaviour, attitudes and values that exist within any field (such as a workplace). He argues that these are more reliable and longer lasting than explicit rules (such as dress codes and codes of conduct) in shaping group identities and responses both within the in-group and from outside. This field-specific habitus is only learned as individuals become familiar with the field (Ustuner & Thompson, 2012), but once understood, it becomes a powerful tool for regulating one's own behaviour and for judging that of others. However, one's ability to assimilate the rules of a particular field is influenced by pre-existing cultural capital as well as, with respect to dress, the financial capital to actualise your understanding of the rules. Bourdieu stresses the importance of assimilating these unspoken rules for one's status within the field, suggesting that this gives individuals the ability to acquire other types of capital and this leads to power (Bourdieu, 1985).

Parmentier et al. (2013) use Bourdieu's concepts to explain the findings of a study that explores the idea of 'brand positioning' for new or hopeful entrants in a particular occupational field and identify three challenges that employees face when considering how to present themselves in the workplace.

- (1) Decisions about dress, appearance and behaviour are complex as fashions change so rapidly, subtle distinctions between different styles can communicate significantly different messages, and the symbols of capital change from one industry, organisation or role to another.
- (2) The subtleties tend to be only understood by those within the field.
- (3) The messages are often tacitly understood. Participants in Parmentier et al.'s study reported that individuals must learn how to look and how to act by observing others and 'sensing how to behave' (2013, p. 382).

These factors are clearly important for individuals: get it right, and the passage to employment and career success is eased; get it wrong, and it is an uphill struggle (Close, Moulard, & Monroe, 2011).

Should career professionals address career image?

The evidence suggests that the various features that make up one's career image can be highly influential on an individual's career, but should conversations about career image be part of a career practitioner's remit? There are both ethical and practical issues inherent in career practitioners' decision whether or not to move into this space.

Differential treatment based on an individual's career image is seen by many as unfair. The argument could be made that in the workplace, individuals should be judged on their character and skills rather than their outward appearance and superficial behaviour. Such ethical issues are likely to differ with each of the three elements that we have identified as career image. Interpersonal skills may be seen as a legitimate basis for discrimination in employment – a sophisticated ability to build relationships is an asset in most arenas. Aesthetic presentation less so, although employers may feel justified in favouring staff who are able to demonstrate good judgement about what it is appropriate to wear. Beauty, however, may well be seen as wholly inappropriate as a basis for employment choices, despite the evidence already presented of its impact. The ethics and practices around the different elements of career image are far from clear. However, for some, such distinctions are equivalent to racial or sexual discrimination and consequently should be minimised and ultimately punished.

Toledano (2013) explores whether it would be possible to legislate on this issue in the way that discriminating on the grounds of disability or race are outlawed. He notes that the state of Michigan passed such legislation in 1977 and a number of other localities in the USA have followed suit. However, the implementation of such laws has not been straightforward. As we have identified above, career image is not a single trait, nor is it stable or unalterable and people's reactions to appearance are not consistent. Whilst there is a strong inter-relationship between the three aspects of career image that we have identified, each poses different ethical and potentially legal issues. Furthermore, while beauty generally reaps benefits for the attractive individual, in some cases beauty itself is discriminated against. Perhaps most difficult of all, many of our judgements about career image are private or even subconscious, which make identifying such discrimination extremely difficult. All of these features have made laws addressing discrimination on the grounds of appearance or attractiveness problematic undertakings.

An alternative response to the recognition of this inequality is to try and level the playing field somewhat by providing individuals with career support in negotiating such issues. However, there are also a number of objections that could be made to this.

Ethical considerations

One important question is whether the provision of advice about career image aligns with the values of the career development profession. Social justice is a core value for many career practitioners within the UK and internationally although, as Sultana (2014) points out, the definition of this term is often far from clear. The National Occupational Standards (UKCES, 2014), the Career Development Institute's code of ethics (CDI, 2014) and professional practice programmes that train career practitioners emphasise the importance of promoting social justice. Perhaps the most coherent definition of this concept is provided by the International Association of Education and Vocational Guidance's (IAEVG) statement on social justice (IAEVG, 2014). Whether practitioners feel that discussion and advice around career image is compatible with this focus on social justice is an area that requires further investigation.

It could be argued that supporting individuals to leverage their career image reinforces a number of existing inequalities and compounds social injustice. Older workers, people with disabilities and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds already face significant barriers to success in the workplace (Berger, 2009; Madera & Hebi, 2012), and these groups are likely to find it harder to benefit from the advantages associated with career image. Research suggests that youth is a key component of attractiveness (Foos & Clark, 2011). People with disabilities also tend to be rated as less attractive (beauty) and less likable (interpersonal skills) than people without disabilities (LaChapelle, Lavoie, Higgins, & Hadjistavropoulos, 2014; Marini, Glover-Graf, & Millington, 2012). It is important to recognise that much of this research suggests that people discriminate and perceive distinctions relating to all aspects of career image and not just to physical beauty.

There is also empirical evidence that a number of the factors linked to career image are less likely to be found in those from lower socio-economic groups. Brown, Hesketh, & Williams (2002) give some evidence that dress and accent are barriers to the workplace for those in lower socio-economic classes, and research consistently shows an inverse link between socio-economic status and obesity (Chen & Paterson, 2006), which as we noted earlier can hinder career success. Any proposal that careers professionals should encourage clients to exploit any advantages that they have in terms of appearance and style could be seen to add barriers to those already facing unfair discrimination and may feel counter to notions of social justice and fairness.

The issues around gender are perhaps more complex. Hakim argues that her theory of erotic capital is a feminist one. She argues that women typically have more erotic capital than men and suggests that given the unequal nature of the workplace and the many barriers that women face, women should be deliberate in taking advantage of the benefits that erotic capital can confer. The successful manipulation of career image or erotic capital would result in women's image determining their career success. Society as it stands makes it easy to reduce women to their appearance and supporting the career success of those with the most desirable image may be in tension with ideas about gender equality.

Given the emphasis the careers profession places on social justice how should career practitioners deal with the uneven distribution of career image, especially given the way in which it intersects with other strands of social injustice? Career practitioners want to do the best for each client – and if that involves raising the issue of appearance in order to encourage the client to dress appropriately for a job interview, then that could be an ethical and helpful thing to do. On the other hand, in encouraging a client to take advantage of their social, cultural and economic capital, rather than relying on their skills and experience, runs the risk of legitimising discrimination, and this is at odds with career practitioners' professional values. This also raises questions about the process of social and cultural change including whether it is possible to meaningfully opt out of the structures of inequality on an individual basis. In other words by refusing to play the career image game do we actively challenge its basis or simply allow others to win it?

Even if career practitioners are comfortable with the ethics of enhancing individual clients' career image, it is important to consider whether this should be part of the professional role of a career practitioner? Below we set out some practical issues addressing whether career practitioners could develop the expertise, but at a professional level, a question remains. Is the arena of career image an appropriate addition to the professional repertoire of a career practitioner, or in embracing it, would career practitioners risk diluting their reputation as professionals with specialist expertise in careers?

Practical considerations

The second set of considerations is more pragmatic. Are career practitioners able to develop expertise that could actually help an individual to enhance their interpersonal skills, improve their aesthetic presentation or even become more beautiful? While the evidence suggests that there are career advantages to be had in enhancing career image, it also highlights the subtlety and dynamism of these issues. It may be difficult to give the right advice.

Enhancing one's career image is not straightforward and is unlikely to offer a quick fix. While it may be possible to teach some interpersonal skills such as how to give a firm handshake, others are more closely related to broader facts of personality such as extraversion or openness. Similarly becoming 'better dressed' requires both aesthetic skill and financial capital (for the purchase of new clothes). It cannot be assumed that clients have access to either of these resources. Finally, and perhaps most challengingly of all, while it may be possible to increase an individual's beauty (for example by changing their waist-to-hip ratio) through diet and exercise, achieving this kind of lifestyle change is challenging and may be beyond the scope of the kind of counselling routinely offered through career guidance.

Even something that seems more straightforward, like advising on what to wear to work, presents the careers adviser with a range of potential challenges. One's choice of work attire communicates occupational and group identity and makes a statement about personal identity. Any attempt by a career development professional to advise and intervene in an individual's approach to dress would therefore not be a question of setting out a list of 'what not to wear', but rather a more complex process of self-reflection, identity development and analysis of the occupational culture that the individual is operating within or seeking to enter.

The final pragmatic concern is whether career practitioners could ever develop the depth and breadth of knowledge about the right image for the right job that would be needed. We discussed above the ideas of Parmentier et al. (2013) and Bourdieu (1993) which highlight how complex and idiosyncratic the rules are. Parmentier stresses how challenging it is for an individual to identify the rules for behaviour and appearance in a single organisation, but a career practitioner would need to develop a depth of understanding of the habitus within a wide range of arenas.

Ways in which careers professionals could address career image

While it is important to recognise the concerns outlined above, it is also useful to consider the strategies that could be employed by careers professionals should they seek to engage with the idea of career image. It is possible to propose a series of positions that could be adopted in relation to career image, ranging from complete avoidance to proactive offers of advice.

- *Consciously avoiding discussion of appearance.* In this approach career development practitioners make it clear to clients that this is not an area that they are able to discuss in any circumstances.
- *Addressing extreme cases.* From time to time a career practitioner might feel that a client's interpersonal skills, aesthetic presentation or, more contentiously, beauty is central to their lack of success in the workplace. Career practitioners could choose to address issues of career image only when they feel that this may be the major barrier experienced by this individual.
- *Referral.* In this approach career development practitioners might argue that while they believe these issues to be important, they do not have the skills to work with clients on them. They might therefore seek to refer to skills coaches (for interpersonal skills), fashion

advisers, image consultants or hair dressers (for aesthetic presentation), or personal trainers, or even cosmetic surgeons (for beauty).

- *Facilitating reflection.* In this approach career development practitioners would actively facilitate individuals to reflect on their career image and on developing strategies to improve it where appropriate. Such a position would not require the development of expertise in interpersonal skills, aesthetic presentation or beauty, but rather in how to have sensitive conversations about the area.
- *Viewing career image as a career management skill.* In this approach career development practitioners may not seek to provide advice as such, but rather to equip clients with the tools to undertake their own research. Rather than suggesting that clients should go and buy a knee length skirt and limit themselves to one ring on each hand, they could be directed to appropriate websites, and encouraged to think about what symbols to look for in the workplace.
- *Selective advice giving.* In this approach practitioners might feel that whilst some aspects of career image are appropriate for discussions with clients, others are not. A practitioner might be comfortable suggesting that a client should make straightforward and easily reversible changes (such as to make eye contact, polish their shoes or tie their hair back), but might be less comfortable making suggestions about weight loss or removing tattoos, which are more significant changes and more likely to be bound up in a client's identity. How such decisions about appropriateness are made is perhaps one area where further research would be useful.
- *Providing advice on career image.* In this approach career development practitioners would actively seek to advise on issues relating to interpersonal skills, aesthetic presentation and beauty.
- *Problematising career image.* Career practitioners could adopt a position of advocating for social change. Professionals could work with individuals and employers to raise awareness of the impact of career image. For example this may be about providing feedback to employers on their selection processes and the detrimental consequences that this could have on the diversity of their workforce.

These eight positions represent a range of different types of engagement with career image. At present it is not clear where most current practice sits and a recommendation for an ideal role is beyond the scope of the current paper.

Towards a research agenda addressing career image

This article set out some of the issues related to career image. It is clear that there are considerable career benefits for those individuals who have good interpersonal skills, have developed the skills to present themselves in aesthetically pleasing way and who are blessed with beauty. Given this it is possible to suggest good reasons for career professionals to engage with the idea of career image and to identify a range of different approaches that such an engagement might take. It is equally possible to identify a range of reasons to resist such engagement and take a critical stance to the concepts such as career image and erotic capital.

We hope that this article will stimulate a debate on such issues and that it will lead to further research in this area. We feel that the following research questions would benefit from further discussion and consideration.

- How do career practitioners feel about supporting people to enhance their career image?

- What existing practice within the careers profession can provide models or examples to learn from?
- Conversely are there any strategies which can be used to reduce the impact of career image on employment decisions?
- Where do individuals access help and support with the development of their career image?
- How does the profession of style counsellor or image consultant deal with these issues and how far does the advice given overlap with that of the careers practitioner?

Much of the evidence presented in this paper is taken from Western cultures, predominately the UK and the USA. One useful direction for future research would be to explore the issues addressed here within other cultures.

It is suggested that the development of such a research agenda, alongside a more robust ethical and theoretical debate could develop the thinking of the profession in this area and to decide whether 'career image' is a necessary part of career development or a tool of oppression.

Notes on contributors

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