Advising clients on appearance: ethical tensions and pragmatic approaches

Abstract

The impact of appearance on career development is well documented. We know with some certainty that those blessed with good looks, a sense of style and a winning smile have an advantage at all stages of the job application process, and throughout their careers, with the most aesthetically pleasing being more likely to be given jobs, higher salaries and promotions (Baert & Decuypere, 2014; Toledano, 2013). What then should those who offer careers advice make of this? Should careers advisers, coaches, HR professionals and line managers, be advising their clients and employees on how to improve their looks? At one level, the answer to this question seems obvious: if the advisers know it can make a difference, of course they should try to help their clients to look more professional or better appropriate for the role, to give them every chance of success in their chosen field. But on closer inspection, this assumption is fraught with challenges. How far should the practitioners go? How can one give advice without causing offence? And most crucially, how could this tacit support of an arguably unfair and superficial value system be justified? In this chapter I will explore some of these issues, drawing on research conducted with career advisers, counsellors and coaches and will offer some practical guidelines for all those who might find themselves tempted to offer advice.

Introduction

In 2016 I conducted some research into career practitioners' experiences and views of the role of appearance in their career conversations. My co-authors and I wanted to find out how central the topic was to their work, how well equipped they felt they were to handle the conversations, and how they approached the topic. The findings (reported in more detail in Yates, Hooley & Bagri, 2017 and Yates & Hooley, 2017) suggested that questions about appearance were playing on the minds of the practitioners' clients, and that the practitioners too felt that the topic, for the most part, was an appropriate one for a professional career conversation. With 96% of the practitioners in our survey reporting that they had discussed or would discuss some aspect of appearance with their clients, it seemed clear that the topic was relevant for both clients and practitioners. But it was not quite that straightforward. The practitioners felt some ethical tensions around the subject and were not always sure how best to manage the conversations effectively. We will explore these two issues in turn.

Ethical tensions

The careers professions have a long standing and strongly held commitment to social justice (Sultana, 2014). Underpinning much of practitioners' motivation is a desire to make the world a better and a fairer place, and a strong strand of career practitioners' work is aimed at changing the system. Practitioners spend time in their day to day work making sure that girls believe they can succeed as engineers, that working class boys feel that law firms will be interested in them, and supporting people with disabilities as they negotiate adjustments in the workplace. Career practitioners also work directly with employers to help them create environments that are welcoming and hospitable to all, and with political organisations influencing and shaping policy (CDI, 2014).

The idea that attractive people get better breaks is yet another example of the way the world of work discriminates, and it is clearly unfair that just by accident of birth, and regardless of their ability to do the job, some people's paths to career success are easier than others'. Given the profession's commitment to social justice, one might assume that career practitioners would try to ensure that their clients don't change their appearance to conform to social norms, aiming to disrupt the social

systems and create a fairer society. But whilst career practitioners might despise this unjust discrimination in society and rail against it, they work with individuals, and are contracted to help expedite their client's passage towards their career goal; and this will often involve encouraging them to comply with employers' expectations.

This tension was clear to see in the participants in our study: advising a client to change how they look to accommodate employers' prejudices did not sit easily with them, yet they also feared that they would be letting their clients down if they failed to mention something that might help them get the job they wanted. If a brief chat about the importance of making sure that an outfit is clean and ironed could give their client the edge in a job interview, then surely it would be wrong to avoid the subject?

Of course, a salient point, and one that sets 'lookism' apart from other kinds of discrimination, is that people **can** change their appearance, at least to some degree (Hooley & Yates, 2015). They can choose different clothes, they can wear make-up and they can cover up tattoos. These are things that are fairly easily changed and people do often, quite voluntarily, alter their image and play around with how they look. It is also widely accepted that different work settings have their own codes of appearance, explicit or implicit (Hazen & Syrdhal, 2010) and it is common for people to adopt quite a different image at work from that which they display at home. But just because you can change your appearance doesn't mean that you should have to, and accepting that it is individuals who should change their appearance, rather than employers who should change their expectations, perpetuates the unjust status quo.

Career practitioners are then left with a dilemma: should they encourage clients to present themselves just the way they want to, and focus their professional efforts on working with employers to reduce bias and change assumptions in society; or should they work with the individual clients to help them achieve their career goals by encouraging them to change themselves in order to fit into the existing, unfair system? The former approach aligns better with practitioners' overall worldview, but the second offers a much more expedient way to help improve the lives of the clients sitting in front of them, and this is important to career practitioners too.

A useful framework for understanding these ethical tensions comes from Watts (2015) who proposes a socio-political analysis of career guidance. Watts notes that there are two driving forces in the academic field of career guidance: sociological and psychological. The sociological approaches, primarily focused on the structures within society, would hold that practitioners should not encourage individuals to change their appearance to meet employers' expectations, as this perpetuates an unjust system; psychological theories, more concerned with the individual, would suggest that practitioners should encourage clients to conform to employer expectations, to give them the best possible chance to achieve their career goals.

The psychological theories, Watts suggests, have tended to dominate in this field, within both practice and research, because career guidance is, in essence, a service delivered to individuals. At the point of delivery, the theories and values which are most relevant to the client will prevail and practitioners therefore will inevitably find that these psychological approaches have more relevance to their everyday practice. Yet they are widely criticised (Bimrose, 2019; Richardson, 2012; Sultana, 2014). Even the humanist approach to career guidance (Ali & Graham, 2006; Rogers, 1961), in which the practitioner facilitates the individual to be their authentic self and avoids influencing the client's direction of thought or behaviour has been criticised for its tacit acceptance of the neo-liberal agenda. Its critics argue that a non-directive focus simply encourages individuals to conform to the

prevailing social mores within the labour market, and fails to apply a critical lens to the existing systems, or disrupt the status quo (Roberts, 1977, 2009).

Arguably these critics are doing the practitioners a disservice. There are times when the two sets of values are simply at odds with each other, and the practitioner has to make a choice. They cannot act to support the client with their personal short term goal, whilst acting to change the social structures: facilitating one impedes the other, and ultimately, the career professional is employed to work with individuals, and to support their individual progression into or within the workplace. The practitioners' hands are tied by the context in which they work and the expectations of both their employers and their clients.

Watts (2015) concludes that practitioners should be aware of both psychological and sociological approaches; and whilst they will, most often, adopt psychological approaches to meet the specific needs of the individual client, they should, where it is judged appropriate, raise alternative ideas with clients and negotiate the approach that feels most suitable. This advice was reflected in the position that the practitioners in our study took. Whilst they wrestled with the tension, they generally concluded that it was, at least sometimes, appropriate to talk to their clients about appearance; more tricky was knowing quite how to go about this.

Pragmatic Approaches

The practitioners in our study were aware of how personal and potentially wounding conversations about appearance could be, how important their working relationships with their clients were, yet how fragile, and how subjective the whole topic is. They knew the conversations needed to be handled with great care. To this end the practitioners had developed and made use of a range of strategies, which allowed them to raise or discuss appearance in a positive way. Their strategies made sure that they did not avoid these difficult conversations, but also that they did not damage the clients' self esteem or the working relationships, and instead led to clients having a greater understanding of changes they could make, and a clear assessment of the pros and cons of making those changes.

Appearance has not traditionally played a big part of the standard professional training of career practitioners. It is not covered in initial training courses, such as the Qualification in Career Development accredited by the Career Development Institute in the UK (UKCES, 2014), and is rarely mentioned in professional training or practitioner text books. The practitioners in our study had devised their own strategies individually, through trial and sometimes quite painful error. But views about the strategies that seemed to be most effective were widely shared, and whilst the practitioners seemed a little cautious about the whole area, it seems that they had, between them, devised a thoughtful and wide-ranging set of tools. The framework below sets out a summary of the practitioners' strategies for dealing sensitively and ethically with issues of appearance in career conversations.

1. **Should the topic be raised at all?**
    1. **What, specifically, is the issue?**
        i. How personal is it?
        ii. Does it really need to be raised?
        iii. Could the client change it?
    2. **Is this a real knowledge gap for the client?**
        i. Are they young, with limited experience in the workplace at all?
        ii. Have they been living overseas?
        iii. Have they been out of the workplace for some time?
    3. **How could the conversation help?**
        i. Could it help the client to get a job?
        ii. Could it help them to clarify their own career goals?
        iii. Could it lead to a boost in self-esteem?
    4. **Who is the best person to deliver this message?**
        i. Does the practitioner know the answer?
        ii. Will the practitioner have credibility delivering the message?
        iii. Is the client going to feel comfortable having that discussion?

2. **How best to raise the topic?**
    1. **Protect the working relationship using:**
        i. Unconditional positive regard
        ii. Sensitive language
        iii. Positive suggestions
    2. **Depersonalise the issue**
        i. Focus the discussion on the role not the person
        ii. If practical, raise the topic first in a group setting
        iii. Rely on external sources, for example, quoting employers, or the findings of research
    3. **Adopt a non-directive approach**
        i. Allow the client to raise the topic
        ii. Allow the client to decide which features to focus on
        iii. Don't present as an expert on the topic
        iv. Encourage the client to work out their right answers for themselves

1. Should the topic be raised at all?

The first decision that practitioners must make is whether to raise the topic at all. Some aspects of appearance can be highly sensitive so practitioners need to be aware that raising the issue carries a risk.

1.1. What, specifically, is the issue?

Not all aspects of appearance are equal and the more personal the issue is, the more risk it carries. Issues to do with clothing, body language and style can be less sensitive than those to do with weight and personal grooming, so raising the topic of what to wear at a job interview, or how to nail the perfect handshake might be less likely to cause offence or damage a client's self-esteem.

Questions of weight or cleanliness have the potential to be hurtful, so should be considered carefully and raised cautiously.

A judgement needs to made about the significance of the issue. Some aspects of appearance might make a minimal difference in a job interview – a firm handshake has been shown to have a small positive impact (Stewart, Dustin, Barrick & Darnold, 2008), but will rarely make or break a job interview. Other issues will carry more weight: an interview candidate who looks as though they haven't washed in a week would have to be an outstanding contender in every other way to stand a chance of a job offer. If the issue could make all the difference to a client then it might be right to raise it. If a change might only lead to a possible or marginal improvement, it might not be worth the risk.

It is also important to consider whether the aspect of appearance is something that the client is actually able to change. Aspects of body language such as eye contact are generally automatic and not usually under people's conscious control – encouraging a client to try to make more eye contact may be very difficult for them to do and the intervention could risk making an unconfident client yet more anxious. Some changes in appearance can be costly, and recommending that an already heavily indebted student invest in a new suit might just not be realistic. Other changes can take time. Clients may be able to lose weight, but there is a limit on how sylph-like one can get over the course of a weekend, and sending a client in to their job interview faint with hunger will probably not see them performing at their best.

1.2. Is this a real knowledge gap for the client?

Given the risks that can accompany a discussion about appearance with a client, it is useful to ascertain whether it is a genuine gap in information for the client. Is there a good reason to think that they do not realise that they should present neatly at an interview or that their facial tattoos will not endear them to every employer? Appearance is a dominant construct in our society and most people do generally have an awareness of how they fit into the social hierarchy of good looks. Raising the topic when a client is already painfully aware that they are overweight, or badly dressed may add nothing.

There are groups of clients whose knowledge about the norms and expectations of the contemporary UK workforce may not be very up to date and a practitioner might then feel more inclined to raise these topics with particular clients. Younger clients, who may not have spent much time at work at all, might find it useful to talk through what level of formality might be expected for them at a job interview or at work. Those who have been living or working overseas might feel a bit out of touch about conventions within the UK labour market, and those who have had a period of unemployment or who have been away from the workforce altogether for sometime might gain in confidence if they are able to talk through the current conventions of workplace attire. Clients looking to change sector could find a discussion about appearance valuable: a move from a law firm to an NGO, or from advertising to the civil service might entail a change in workplace expectations and clients might feel more confident about how they present themselves if they have thought through the culture of their new industry. If a client does not fit into any of these categories, it may well be that they are quite aware that they do not look the part.

1.3. How could the conversation help?

Clearly, there is no point in raising a difficult and potentially damaging topic with a client if it is not going to help. I have talked a bit so far about the importance of appearance in job selection – we know that looking the part, and being well-groomed and attractive make a difference to people's

chances of succeeding at the interview stage, but there are other possible benefits to a discussion about appearance.

Image and appearance can also be a marker of identity, and as such can hold clues to the kinds of environments in which people might feel most comfortable (Barnard, 2002; Cutts, Hooley & Yates, 2015). Different occupations, industries or organisations have their own social identities, and the style typically adopted by the members of a particular group reflect the group identity (Hazen & Syrdhal, 2010). As such, people's reactions to the outfits and images typically seen in different workgroups can offer a valuable insight to their own values and goals. A discussion about whether a client would feel comfortable in the formal attire expected in the professional services industry, the uniform of a retail environment, or the highly fashionable casual wear expected in some media companies, could help a client think about how they would fit in within a particular work-culture and this could lead to insights about their values, expectations and identity.

Discussions about appearance can risk damaging clients' self-esteem, but addressing these issues can also sometimes lead to a boost in clients' confidence. If an individual is feeling unconfident about their fashion choices, perhaps unsure about what kind of formality is appropriate for a job interview, whether they should cover up their tattoos and what their future employer might feel about their beard or dyed hair, a conversation with a career practitioner could help them to clarify their own views. This could lead them to feel more confident about their choices and perhaps allow them to present themselves with more poise at interview, or on their first day at work.

1.4 Who is the right person to deliver this message?

The last thing to consider, when choosing whether to raise the topic at all, is whether the practitioner is the right person to deliver the message. First, any information given must be accurate and up to date. The whole field of how to dress and present oneself at work is complex and subjective (Parmentier, Fischer & Reuber, 2013), and it may well be that the practitioner is not, in all honesty, fully up to speed with the nuances of what is appropriate in all contexts. They may feel sure of their ground when it comes to personal hygiene and grooming, but perhaps less confident in the level of formality expected at an interview, or the reactions of an employer to piercings. Perhaps they are familiar with the conventions in some industries, but not others, or maybe their knowledge is a little out of date. In these circumstances, it might be more fruitful to invite the client to take advice from someone with more relevant or recent experience.

Some of the practitioners in our survey felt that they would not be a credible conduit for some messages about appearance. One or two felt that they themselves perhaps were not particularly elegant, fashionable or slim, and were concerned that their own appearance might diminish the impact of their advice to others on how to look good. Other practitioners wondered if demographic differences between themselves and their clients might make the conversation less comfortable. One older male careers adviser felt it would be entirely inappropriate to discuss clothing with a young, female client, and others commented that these conversations might have more impact between practitioners and clients who were the same sex and the same sort of age. These kinds of challenges can be overcome, and I would not want to suggest that only fashion-conscious practitioners, the same age and gender as their clients are qualified to have these discussions, but it may be worth considering whether a client might gain more from a conversation with their friends, their colleagues or from some online research.

If the practitioner decides at this stage that the topic is indeed a suitable one to raise with their client, the next step is to consider some strategies that can ensure that the message is delivered in a

positive and constructive way, increasing the client's self-esteem, and strengthening the working relationship with the two.

2. How best to raise the topic?

In this second part of the framework I offer some practical suggestions for the conversations themselves, for maximising impact and minimising risks. The two key dangers associated with these conversations that the practitioners in our survey identified were i) the potential damage to their clients' self-esteem and ii) a risk to the working relationship between the practitioner and client. These both are important to preserve. We know that high levels of confidence make a significant difference to people's chances of success in job interviews and in their career development more generally (Betz, 2004; Judge & Bono, 2001; Songqi, Huang, & Mo, 2014). A well-meaning comment from a professional might ensure that their client has neat and tidy hair at a job interview, but if it makes the client feel more anxious and less sure of how they might come across, then on balance, their chances of interview success are probably reduced. The second issue is the relationship between the client and practitioner which has long been shown to be at the heart of any therapeutic intervention (de Haan et al., 2013; Masdonati, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2009), and a solid foundation to the relationship allows the conversations to delve deeper. An ill-timed piece of feedback and advice, delivered before the client feels safe can cause a damaging rift between practitioner and client.

2.1 ***Protect the working relationship***

Central to a good professional relationship is unconditional positive regard. This term was used by Rogers in 1961, in his exploration of approaches to counselling and underpins effective career conversations. Unconditional positive regard is the non-judgemental stance adopted by the practitioner which communicates to their client their belief that the client is basically an ok person (*positive regard*) and that this belief is unshakable, and is not dependent (or *conditional*) on anything they say or anything they do. Unconditional positive regard is achieved through authentic and deep empathy. A sincere effort to understand the client, how they are feeling, and why they have made the choices they have made can lead to a real understanding between the practitioner and the client which helps the two to work together, as a team, to move forwards. If the client can feel this unconditional positive regard from the practitioner, they are then much more likely to take any comments and advice in the spirit in which they are intended, and are less likely to find words offensive or to be embarrassed by their own perceived lack of sophistication.

Once the professional relationship is on solid ground, the practitioner must be thoughtful about their language, expressing their thoughts tentatively and sensitively, and making sure that they are acutely aware of their client's reaction to their comments. This can allow the conversation to delve deeper, but ensures that the practitioner can pull back the moment they see that they have gone far enough. Asking permission can be another useful approach. The practitioner could suggest to their client that they have had an idea and ask whether they could raise a slightly personal topic. This acknowledges, up front, that the message might be a difficult one to hear, and as well as allowing the client just to say 'no, I'm not feeling robust enough to hear this now', it gives both client and practitioner permission to keep a close eye on the client's feelings, and to back away from the discussion if needed.

Finally, and very much in keeping with the tone of any career conversation, it is important to remember to deliver any message using positive suggestions rather than critical comments. Suggesting that a client might want to treat themselves to a haircut or a new pair of shoes before

their interview, and pointing out how this might make them feel more confident on the day, clearly feels like a much more positive message than drawing their attention to their scruffy appearance.

2.2. Depersonalise

One of the most widely used strategies from the practitioners in our survey was depersonalisation. Practitioners addressed the issue of appearance, but approached it in such a way that it did not feel personal to the client themselves. This allowed them to discuss the topic at some depth without risking hurting them or causing offence.

Practitioners made the topic less personal by focusing on the role rather than the person. If discussions can be angled around the requirements of the job, the organisation or the context, then the client can see any choices around appearance as being part of a role they are playing, rather than anything to do with their personal identity. A discussion that focuses on how people generally dress for interviews, or the value that accountancy firms place on making sure their client-facing employees reflect the brand of the organisation, can help a client to make positive choices about their appearance, without feeling that they are compromising their own identity.

Many of the practitioners from our survey work in group settings and found that this was an excellent forum for raising issues of appearance. This group context ensures that the individual clients do not think that the topic is being raised because of something that they are doing wrong, and because the discussions are inevitably general, the messages that can be communicated can be stronger than those that are suitable within a one to one. A follow up one to one meeting can then build on the more general issues raised in the group session and address the specific needs of the client.

Citing external sources can be an effective way to deliver a meaningful message. A relevant piece of research, or a quote from a conversation with an employer, can feel like a message from a third party, and the risk to the working relationship between the client and the practitioner client is therefore minimised. Having summarised a third party's view, the practitioner and client can then discuss the issue together, collaboratively, perhaps leading to a valuable conversation that explores the client's reaction to the idea that looking a certain way may enhance their chances of success. The client might then make the choice to stick to their own image, or they might choose to embrace the look that is most likely to get them the job. Either way, their choice will be an informed one, and they may well feel additionally confident about their appearance having talked it over.

2.3. Adopt a non-directive approach

Alongside these strategies to depersonalise the topic, a non-directive approach can ensure that a discussion about appearance is conducted in a way that works for the client. With this approach it is the client who identifies the questions or problems, and who finds the answers or solutions which best suit them. The thorny ethical tensions discussed earlier in the chapter are not as salient, as the practitioner is not making any decisions about whether the client should or should not change themselves in order to conform to society's unfair biases.

Non-directivity is a core aspect of a humanistic approach to counselling (Rogers, 1967). The key assumption underpinning this philosophy is that individuals are their own best experts: however empathic or knowledgeable a practitioner might be, they are never going to understand their client's context the way the client themselves can, and so their advice is not going to be as relevant or valuable as the client's own opinion. The practitioner's role, therefore, should be to help the client to think the dilemma through themselves, and to facilitate the client listening to their own inner

voice and reaching their own conclusions. With a topic such as appearance, which could engender quite diverse ethical opinions, a non-directive approach could be a useful way to manage the conversation to make sure that the ethical position adopted reflects the client's position, and not the practitioner's.

A non-directive practitioner will discuss appearance only if the topic is first raised by the client. Even if the practitioner feels that their client would benefit from a discussion about how they look, a non-directive approach holds that it is not the practitioner's role to decide what the client would find useful. The practitioner might ask the client what they want to discuss, invite them to consider whether there is anything else they want to raise, encourage them to explore any possible reasons they can think of which might help of hinder them in their pursuit of their goals, but ultimately, if the client does not raise the topic of appearance, then the practitioner should assume that they do not want to talk about it. If the client does indicate that they would find it useful to talk about their image, then it would also be down to the client to choose which particular aspects of appearance to focus on – they can then make their own choices about which elements they feel they would benefit from discussing and which they feel are too personal.

The non-directive approach holds that the practitioner is not an expert in the topic, and indeed, it would be difficult for a career practitioner to build up a comprehensive expertise in this field. Dress codes vary from one industry to another and from one organisation to another, and they change year by year. It would be more than a full time research job just to keep up to date with the current norms and expectations. On top of that, it is a very subjective topic, and the practitioner and the client might not share the same opinions, leading perhaps to confusion rather than clarity for the client.

Accepting then the principle that people are their own best experts, the practitioner's role in a conversation about work-related appearance should be to help the client to think through the topic for themselves. The practitioner could ask a series of open questions 'What do you think you might wear to the interview?', reflect their answers back to them 'So, what you are saying is…', and invite them to explore their own opinions 'How would you feel about having to cover up your tattoos every day at work?'. If a client were to ask the practitioner for an opinion, they would deflect the question back to them 'That's a really important question. I wonder how you could find out the answer?'.

Conclusion

Appearance is clearly relevant to careers, and people at work make choices about their appearance which will have an impact on their career paths. In this chapter I approach the topic from the perspective of professionals who support people with their career development. Whilst we might understand that appearance impacts career, it is not necessarily a position that we need to approve of or accept as inevitable. In acknowledging this, career practitioners are faced with an ethical dilemma: do they rail against the unjust social norms and refuse to do everything they can to facilitate their client's career success, or do they support their client but in doing so co-operate with an unfair system? Advice here comes from both Watts (2015) and the experienced practitioners in our study, who suggest that practitioners should support clients to achieve their own goals, which will often involve advising them to conform to social conventions, but should be alert to the broader impact that this might have, and be open to treating the topic in a different way if it seems appropriate. For practitioners who decide that they should address these issues, I have proposed an empirically derived framework, drawing on the expertise of career advisers, counsellors and coaches. The framework offers practitioners some guidance, helping them make the choice about

whether to address the topic with their clients, and offers some pragmatic suggestions for their conversations – helping to make sure that the topics are discussed effectively but sensitively.

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