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and Implications of Psychology

Charles S. Myers

Excerpt

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Chapter I

*The Help of Psychology in the
Choice of a Career*¹

Before I attempt to assess the help which psychology can render in the choice of a career, it seems desirable to consider briefly whether *any* help is necessary for the young person choosing his career. For, strange though it may appear, there are people who, on various grounds of general principles, feel opposed to *any* kind of vocational guidance. Some of them maintain that it is really beneficial to let young persons discover for themselves their most suitable occupation by the 'rough-and-tumble' process of repeated trial and failure. Others urge that most young persons show no special 'bent' for any particular career but are endowed with the ability to adapt themselves equally well to a wide variety of occupations. Others, again, question the value of vocational advice in these days of difficult employment when so often the young person must

¹ Modified from a Public Discourse, delivered at the Norwich Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, on 10 September 1935.

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accept the very first vacancy which he is offered—whatever be the nature of the occupation.

To these various objections the following replies may be made. Experience shows beyond question that the majority of young people suffer, instead of benefit, when they are left to discover their most suitable occupation by a series of unsuccessful efforts. They lose self-confidence owing to their successive failures. Too often they only change their occupation when their misfit is so glaring that they are discharged by their employer. And when they remain in an unsuitable post, either it may bore them almost insufferably, or it may strain them to such a degree that they become 'nervy', unhappy and restless, perhaps rebellious against society: indeed, an important cause of social unrest and even of crime, especially among young people, has with good reason been ascribed to an unsuitable occupation.

It is quite true that only rarely can an *ideally* suitable occupation be found. For very few of us are 'pegs' which will fit to perfection the 'hole' of any one occupation: we can do equally and fairly well, and we can be equally and fairly happy, in the work of several different occupations. But it is not less true that there is a far larger number of other occupations in which we shall do

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far worse and be far from happy. In point of fact, the expert vocational adviser hardly ever limits his recommendations to one particular career. He believes rightly enough in some limited power of human adaptation; but he insists that while there are certain careers which are to be recommended to a particular applicant, there are other careers which, owing to their unsuitability, should on no account be attempted.

He insists, too, that in times like these of much unemployment it becomes all the more important to make the best possible initial choice, when the difficulty of finding another post will make the maladjusted young person hesitate before relinquishing one that proves unsuitable, despite the mental or physical strain, boredom, irritation, and dissatisfaction which it evokes.

But vocational guidance is important not only for the benefit of the person who receives it and of those with whom he is brought daily into social contact. The adoption of an unsuitable occupation and its subsequent abandonment mean inevitably a huge national loss—a loss in productive efficiency, a waste of human effort and material, and a waste of time—in needlessly interviewing, training and employing successive unfit applicants until a suitable worker is found.

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Moreover, in actual practice, if left to himself, the young person frequently fails to make a wise choice of a career. It is found, more often than not, that he drifts by mere chance into an occupation; and a special inquiry among those who have been educated at secondary and public schools has shown that about one-half of them intend to take up occupations which, on grounds either of ability or of temperament and character, are judged unsuitable by the psychologically trained vocational adviser whose guidance has proved correct in the vast majority of his cases. Sometimes the decision of young people is determined by parental wishes. And too often the influence which a parent may be able to exercise in finding for his child a position either in his own occupation or in the business of a relative or friend blinds him to the utter unsuitability of such a career for his boy or girl. Or the father may be so ambitious for his son, or the mother may play so exclusively for a 'safe' occupation, that again a hopelessly unsuitable career is selected for a naturally unadventurous or adventurous youth, as the case may be.

It is therefore not surprising that, when left to himself, the young person appears usually to exercise a rather better choice than when subject

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merely to parental influence. But his own choice is so often wrong because, as a rule, he knows nothing, or virtually nothing, of the different requirements of occupations for success in them, and because he neither recognizes nor takes into account sufficiently his own abilities or disabilities. He is guided principally by his interests and ideals, and these are apt only too often to lead him astray. Thus, in a spirit of devotion to humanity, a girl may decide to take up hospital nursing or school teaching, quite unmindful of her lack of physique, accuracy or patience so necessary for successful nursing, or of her inability to preserve discipline which will make her future life in a school one of almost intolerable strain and torture. Endowed with some literary talent, a boy may embark on journalism with similar failure, because he has disregarded his lack of pushfulness and ability to write speedily, which are so essential for success in this occupation. Or again, a weakling may compensate for his physical disabilities by day-dreams or phantasies of flying: he aims therefore at being an aviator. Other choices may be dictated by fashion, or through imitation consequent on hero-worship.

The school teacher is hardly a better guide to a career than the parents or the young person

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himself. He may or he may not know his pupil well: if he knows him well, he may know him only from one particular standpoint—the relation of pupil to master or mistress. Moreover, the teacher cannot be expected to know the various requirements of different occupations, of the abilities and qualities of temperament needed for success in each, and of the kind, length and cost of training and of the future prospects of each. It is therefore not surprising to receive (as I received) from one head master the following observation: ‘Realizing that my knowledge of the boy is imperfect and one-sided, and my knowledge of occupational requirements grossly inadequate, I always feel more or less of a charlatan when called upon to advise. My only consolation is that my advice is so rarely followed that there is no real cause for my distress!’

Of late years, in certain secondary and in most public schools, a single teacher has been appointed to give special attention during part of his time to vocational guidance. He has received the name of ‘careers master’—but no training whatever in this part of his duties. He may even apply tests and other psychological methods, although he may be unqualified to do so, thus bringing into popular contempt methods which are unquestion-

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ably helpful when properly used. Many secondary and a few public schools have recourse to the voluntary Committees formed under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour by the Headmasters and Headmistresses Associations. But, efficient as is their placement work, they would be the first to admit the imperfection of their present efforts and methods in the direction of vocational advice. The juvenile employment officers, for whose work the Ministry of Labour is responsible, are mainly, but by no means wholly, concerned, together with the voluntary Local Juvenile Advisory Committees appointed for the purpose, in the guidance and placement of elementary school children. But these officers too receive no systematic training in their duties; and at present there are no adequate official prospects, nor, in consequence, is there permanence, in their work. Very often in elementary schools a Conference is held terminally, at which the school-leaver is advised as to his future occupation. But the interview of each child and parent is necessarily restricted to an inadequately brief interval of time; and too often the child's own wishes, so frequently erratic or irrational, tend to receive undue consideration.

We may conclude, then, not only that help in

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the choice of a career is necessary but also that the methods now generally employed are capable of great improvement. And for such help and improvement we may naturally look to psychology—the science which is concerned with the mind and resulting behaviour. The directions in which psychology is actually helping—both by research and by practice—lie (i) in improved occupational analysis, (ii) in the more reliable and more accurate assessment of mental abilities and qualities, (iii) in insistence on a very broad attitude and a carefully balanced judgment in guidance, and (iv) in the establishment of systematic methods of training vocational advisers.

In occupational analysis much has already been done to determine the requirements for success in different occupations. But a vast field still awaits investigation, while a great deal of what has been done is sadly defective from the psychological standpoint. Such matters as appropriate courses of vocational training, prospects, seasonal fluctuations, hours of work and wages have been satisfactorily enough treated by those who have been engaged in occupational analysis. But information is still sadly lacking as to the precise mental and bodily abilities and qualities of temperament and character which are likely to favour

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success in the many different industrial, commercial and professional occupations. Where they have been described, they are usually couched in such vague or identical terms that, as has been justly said, they 'are scarcely more illuminating than the remarks commonly made by centenarians when invited to explain the secret of longevity'.¹ Consequently, we are far from being able to classify occupations and processes in such a way that a person who possesses the abilities and qualities required for success in one member of a group of occupations may reasonably be expected to succeed in any other member of the same group, and to fail in other groups of occupations. It is obvious that the analysis and classification of occupations require the skill of the trained psychologist; he has already started on this work.

He began it by assessing the general intelligence required for success in different levels of occupational life. He chose general intelligence both because of its importance and because he possesses already a sufficiently reliable means of estimating it. Essential as it is that a young person does not enter an occupation which needs higher intelli-

¹ A. Macrae, *Talents and Temperaments*, London: Nisbet, 1932, p. 148.

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gence than he may possess, it is equally essential that he does not enter an occupation of so routine a nature that it makes insufficient demand on the intelligence which he may possess. Excessive boredom must be avoided as much as excessive strain. The result of long psychological, combined with statistical, research has been to establish the working hypothesis that a certain single factor of general ability runs through all mental and manual occupational work—the ability to discern relevant relations and to make appropriate use of them. This innate ability to discern relevant relations and to make appropriate use of them may be usefully called ‘general intelligence’. Mathematically we may isolate it, but psychologically and in practice it can never be separated from the material on which it works. For this reason tests have had to be devised for assessing abstract or linguistic intelligence and other tests for assessing practical or concrete intelligence. In the former we employ ‘verbal’ tests, tests involving symbols—the use of words, numbers and abstract ideas; in the latter we employ ‘performance’ tests, involving the manipulation of concrete objects.

These tests have been devised to estimate, so far as possible, innate intelligence as distinguished