Career counseling research-practice disparities: What we know and what we need to know

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The most practical principle in contextualisation emanates from our understanding of the experience of everyday life. However, this principle is not confined to such understanding. The central question regarding contextualisation is embedded in the "cultural contours" of counselling. In addition to the centrality of the cultural component, the need for an increased focus on cultural factors and their implications for counseling reinforces the importance of having a sound understanding and evaluation of individual life themes and the contexts in which they manifest. This article is premised on the view that cultural or contextual issues are integral to the puzzle of career counseling and cannot be seen in isolation. A major challenge facing career counselors is recognising the plurality of knowledge-based cultures and contexts, and the demands this places on their competencies as counsellors.

Keywords: career counseling; competencies; contexts; life design counseling; work

Introduction

The careful examination of work-related topics reveals that – in the Greek sense of ἔργον (ergón), an action that carries out an inner desire, similar to the Latin labour – and career counselling as a means of addressing occupational problems in the modern world, are common today. Work and its necessity, and counselling and its mission, are not recent phenomena. The relationship between those who work, how they work, and why they work, and their need for guidance, is as old as the concept of work itself.

The disparities between career counselling theory and practice are discussed here. To overcome these disparities, a new approach to the strategic impact of counseling is needed, incorporating cultural and indigenous perspectives. The literature suggests that the disparities can be understood and dispelled by considering the conceptualisation and practice of reflexivity and dialogic interaction.

Work and Counselling in Ancient Greece

These same concerns were present in the seventh century B.C. when the Greek poet Hesiod wrote his poem *Work and Days* (see Ellopos.net, n.d.). At that time, an agricultural catastrophe had most likely struck the region where he lived, rendering the life of the peasantry uncertain and precarious. Those who did not have work, or those who did not work flat out from sunrise to sunset, were sure to fall into poverty or even servitude. Work was thus a necessity to avoid poverty, as also emphasised in *Virgil's Georgics*: *labor omnia vincit* (work conquers all) (1916), but it was also an *obligation* imposed on the people by the gods. In other words, work was a *material* obligation as well as a *moral* one, taking the form of a dignified activity rather than a *shameful* one. Work ordered by the gods (and not only for purposes of survival) was not seen as servitude, but as the fulfilment of an obligation that formed part of the general sense of justice.

What is at issue here is a kind of morality of a *practical nature,* whose objective was to facilitate an individual's rise to prosperity and wealth, in addition to (most importantly) *consideration* for others. Hesiod believed that hard work – which would result in income and escape from poverty and reflect also a sense of justice arising from reward for work – was the true path to happiness. Zeus (who could today be seen as the "social system" or perhaps even the "state") rewarded those who acted in accordance with justice. Perses (the character the poet is "counselling" as someone experiencing problems in adapting to a particular context) ought therefore to act in a way that enriches himself, and at the same time, show consideration for his neighbours, friends, and relatives, namely through work and just action. Hesiod refers to working the land, which he himself did as a farmer. However, being Greek and living near the sea (a combination of cultural and geographical contexts), he argued that other activities, namely activities related to the sea and navigation, could also increase one's economic resources.

In his poem, Hesiod gives wise counsel to Perses – similar to that from parents to their children or between friends – not so much from a professional perspective, as is the case today with counselling, but through dialogue based on the underlying personal life stories of those involved: the counsellor has a "conditioned" view of those counselled, who is encouraged to narrate, or reflect on micro-narratives of his or her life story (Savickas, 2015). Or, in a more familiar way, the counsellor interacts with the client, asking him or her to "tell me your story" through narratives.

That is how it was in ancient western times (and, admittedly, to a limited extent, even in modern counselling), but what are the key facets of the situation today?

Career Counselling: What We Know Now

The first career counseling services were offered at the beginning of the 20th century as part of a process that Frank Parsons (1909) called vocational guidance. It represented a new scientific domain that looked to help individuals, particularly the youth, who had experienced the initial effects of the industrial revolution. Up until the 1950s, the main objective of guidance was the choice of an occupation and professional success. Such guidance consisted essentially of analysing an individual's capacities and comparing them with the requirements of a particular profession thereby determining which profession would be best suited to the capacities of the particular individual. This approach was characterised by the importance of measurable attributes as predictors of vocational success: the psychology of an individual, which underlies the method of determining such attributes, including those of professionals, indicates the relationship between his or her capacities and the choice of an occupation. At that time, people had to act according to the prevailing social norms as determined by the context in which they lived.

In North America and Europe, it was following World War II that the contributions of Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad and Herma (1951), and later Donald Super (1957) found their place in the history of vocational guidance, triggering the conceptual view of career as a central life role. The most significant contribution was Super's developmental model for evaluating career as a developmental process (Duarte, 2009).

These first counselling paradigms were predominantly evaluative, as evaluation was the starting point (the verification of variability) and also the destination of counselling (the knowledge of the individual and the sharing of self-knowledge). The differential as well as the developmental models led to theoretical and practical advances, based on the evolution of methods for observation and also on the evolution of data analysis techniques, including factor and item analysis, and later structural models.

Today, social, economic, and political changes are taking place across the globe, and problems affecting large sectors of the population – unemployment, poor living standards, and the transition from school to work – have helped consolidate new perspectives on guidance culminating in the study of the relationship between the individual, society, and other individuals, designnated as constructionist perspectives (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004). This has led to a distinction between theories of development and theories of career counseling (Savickas, 2011; Savickas & Walsh, 1996), highlighting the differences between vocational psychology theories and career counselling psychology theories, thereby placing the spotlight on constructivism (Savickas, 2011, 2012).

Contexts and Counseling

Contrary to what happens with the more traditional forms of counselling – of which Hesiod's poem, considered by many as the pioneer articulation of labor economics, would be the paradigmatic example – professional counselling today is not merely "giving counselling" but is about listening to those counselled, deconstructing the story that he or she might tell, and later retelling the story through its association with other experiences – a linkage made possible by the similarities of perceived meanings and/or of the felt or induced affects that help the individual build new perspectives regarding the issues faced (Guichard, 2017). However, a thorough understanding of the other "worlds" in which individuals interact or may come to interact in is also crucial as these are the contexts in which a person currently finds him/herself or may find him/herself in the future. Put another way: "culture and relationship are core tools of meaning-making for people's experiences; understanding work means identifying how social, economic and political forces influence the distribution of resources and affordances on a macro level" (Pouyaud, 2016:8).

The environment, however, also acts on the individual. In other words, the individual goes about his or her life, but in a two-way relationship with his or her context. Hesiod had already picked up on this in concluding that the individual worked on the land, but lived near the sea. Whenever work on the land failed to produce results, the individual could always look to the sea. Against this background, assimilation (e.g., the potentialities of the environment) and accommodation (its laws and characteristics), in a Piagetian sense (Piaget, 1952), are common to both action and thought and constitute the functional law of behaviour.

We could well think then that human development is a succession of major constructions in the relationship between the individual and the environment – either natural or artificial – that it is a search for balance, and that each construction integrates with and reorganises those that came before: in life design counselling (LDC) (Savickas, 2011), this happens each time the individual tells and retells his or her life story, binding a variety of episodes together into life themes. This process is not about raising awareness of the succession of episodes that have impacted on the individual today, because those episodes were assimilated and accommodated yesterday. The stories of each individual reinforce the need to understand the contexts in which those stories manifest or have manifested. Vygotsky (1986) highlights the selective internalisation of social interactions, that is, the process of socialisation in a specific cultural niche. Of course, it could be asked whether the principle of cultural relativism implied here is scientifically and socially neutral, both in presumptions and

implications, but the truth is that socialisation maximises the flexibility of relationships between the individual and him/herself, with others, and with the environment.

We could look at counselling as a meaningful engagement with individual concerns, undertaken as a form of reflexivity through dialogical approaches. The principle binding this engagement is "tell me your story." This approach uses counselling to build a framework for organising the stories – or narratives – told during a process that is critically engaged with both the context and the future, the difficult future. This is a form of counselling based on the ideographic definition of success, seen not only as a general operation process, but also as a kind of balancing act that goes much further. An act that represents the sociocultural context of a form of counselling that is not only something that facilitates adaptation to the environment, but that is also a catalyst for a modification of the environment to suit oneself or perhaps even for a capacity to find a new environment.

Reflexivity and Dialogues

The context of change in which we live today requires responses based on new competencies and on the assumption of new responsibilities on the path to survival and satisfaction. So, what exactly, do we still need to examine? In terms of theory, we need an improved theorisation of reflexivity in relation to the LDC framework. At the same time, the concept of dialogues needs to be smoothly integrated into the most important goal of career counseling, which is to useful to the counselee.

The word *reflexive* comes from the Latin noun *reflexus* (v. *reflecto* – to reflect), meaning to turn back. With this recourse to the "archaeology" of ancient discursive practices and as a pretext for rethinking the impact of the different cultural forms of the "tell me your story" principle, a brief analysis from different stances is needed. From an anthropological and literary point of point, the magical world of Alice in Wonderland has been cited in relation to reflexivity, namely the "through the looking glass" metaphor. One can, of course, view reflexivity as an inversion rather than a direct reflection of the self (Herzfeld, 1987), as reflexivity requires subject and object, breaking down the wall of self-concern, and taking the initiative towards self-knowledge and the inevitable consideration of the surrounding world of events, people, and places (Ruby, 1982).

The definition of reflexivity proposed by George Mead as "the turning back of the experience of the individual upon [her- or himself]" (Mead, 1934:134) makes sense. However, in the original social interpretivist sense of Mead, the "other" is not only the other (significant) person, "but another perspective: another way in which the

world is judged or appreciated" (Natanson, 1956: 64). We can also consider Delamont's definition of reflexivity as "a social scientific variety of self-consciousness" (Delamont, 1991:8).

Reflexivity involves also an inspiring touch of internal conversation (Archer, 2003), an idea that describes the continuous self-confrontation of the individual and the complex dialogical interaction with the (changing) social environment. Reflexivity is therefore "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice-versa" (Archer, 2007:4).

The sociological theorisation of this "complex dialogical interaction" comes from the school of American Pragmatism, grounded mainly in the work of John Dewey, William James, Charles Peirce, and George Mead (Scheffler, 1974). For this quartet of authors, reflexivity can be more easily and effectively practiced in a relational, intersubjective process than in a solitary self-search. Aron (2000) argues that reflexivity can occur only relationally, involving a coming together of different minds. Reflexivity is thus focused on the creation of our personal goals (or the construction of our biography). This approach allows for broader approaches to life, projects, agendas, and goals, rather than the dictation of planning, cognitive factors, or rational calculations. This is what makes reflexivity one of the major pillars of LDC (Cardoso, Duarte, Gaspar, Bernardo, Janeiro & Santos, 2016).

Reflexivity, however, has to be integrated through dialogue, taking on a metacognitive role, rather than acting as something designed to extract data regarding a specific matter (Kögler, 2005). Dialogue should be seen as part of a biographical narrative that can encourage a flow of information – including information of a psychological nature – that may have been anticipated by the counsellor and those counselled, thus facilitating reflexivity.

Curiously, nothing said here so far is either new or even representative of a contemporary generation. Plutarch's (approx. 46–120 AD) *Parallel lives of noble Grecians and Romans* (n.d.) is a collection of biographies of famous personalities (who even for the author were already "ancient" thus complicating his attempts to find documental evidence) focused not on the episodes or facts drawn from the lives that he was writing about, but on motivation and context. This approach was further affirmed through his biographies on two different personalities, one Greek and one Roman. Although coming from distinct cultural and organisational backgrounds, the two were viewed in parallel, allowing Plutarch to create a portrait of each through not only their *particularity* but also their *relativity* to each other, so that "in some way he anticipates not so much the objective biography of the eighteenth and nineteenth century as the

psychological biography of the twentieth" (Jones, 1982:963).

Vygotsky (1986) believed that the act of putting spoken words and unspoken thoughts into writing released and, in the process, changed the content itself. The dialogues between Socrates and his students, immortalised by Plato, serve as an example for career counselling. In these dialogues, people were taught that only the properly contemplated use of words and analysed thought could lead to virtue – a true virtue that could lead a society to justice and individuals to their god. Virtue, both on an individual and societal level, depended on a profound examination of previous knowledge and the internalisation of its highest principles.

The concept of (interindividual) dialogue is a fundamental factor at the very heart of counselling. Dialogue is central to the understanding of the various situations that together are referred to as life.

Dialogue is integrated into an act of communication and, contrary to the foundationalism view of language, is built on hermeneutic or dialogical positions as reflected in the thoughts of Bakhtin (1981) and Gadamer (1975). Hermeneutics focuses on the understanding of the meaning that the individual attributes to his or her own life, accepting the historical reality of the experiences that individuals have lived through and placing the individual in the position of the author of his or her own life. Through reflexivity and dialogue, the individual can simultaneously become the author and interpreter who "understand[s] by constant reference to his own perspective, preconceptions, biases, and assumptions that rest, fundamentally, on his lifestyle, life experiences, culture, and tradition" (Tappan, 1997:649). From the LDC perspective, something new grows out of what we already know about who we are in symphony with Piaget's (1952) idea that each individual's story reinforces the need for understanding referenced in the contexts in which behavior manifests.

On the other hand, Bakhtin (1981:68) emphasises the dialogical nature of all understanding. Understanding presupposes (and recognises) the "other" with whom one can agree or disagree. Bakhtin (1993) argues that "the consciousness of other people cannot be perceived, analyzed [*sic*], as objects or as things – one can only relate to them dialogically. To think about them means to talk with them; otherwise they immediately turn to us their objectivised side: they fall silent, close up, and congeal into finished, objectified images." Contrary to idealistic philosophy, dialogism argues that a fully voiced consciousness (i.e., with its own ideas and points of view) is found in the interaction with another, equally voiced, consciousness. What is implied here then is that dialogues need to engage genuinely with context (Mkhize, 2008).

Both systems are grounded in a narrative conception of the self, suggesting that narrative change results from the elaboration and development of narrative exceptions to a client's core problematic self-narrative.

Hawes (1998:105–106) defines dialogical reflexivity as "a process of explicitly turning one's critical gaze back on oneself as well as the professional, historical, and cultural discourses that empower and constrain one's capacities to think and act in the context of a relationship." The LDC process can then be conceptualised reflexively and dialogically through the use of the Career Construction Interview (CCI) (Savickas, 2015), or by evoking the client's micro-narratives in a way that helps in the construction of a coherent, connected, and integrated macro-narrative.

An example: The LDC approach
To better explain how clients narratively symbolise their experiences in the LDC process, Savickas (2015) proposed that clients should initially develop symbolic representations of their experiences through attempts at articulating micro-narratives. A subsequent reflection on these experiences is then required in order to understand particular origins and their congruence with current needs, interests, and goals. The client is then invited to elaborate on new realisations that facilitate the development of macro-narratives of experience and the forging of new intentions. Finally, clients revise their view of the self by formulating alternative ways of being and seeing, expressed, for example, through the construction of new career plans.

Research on change in LDC has revealed that a client's narrative transformation begins with the understanding of the problem, identification of life themes, and the emergence of a new self-representation (Cardoso, Silva, Gonçalves & Duarte, 2014).

What We Need To Know
A multi-approach in counselling – for research and practice as a means of overcoming career counselling research-practice gaps – looks like the future: an idiosyncratic methodology in addition to the recognised plurality of contextual/cultural knowledge. The relationship between a multi-approach in counseling and recognising the plurality of contextual/cultural knowledge should take into account the behavioral manifestations that occur during the counseling process, particularly as it is the individual at the center of such processes as the "I" who knows and feels and who is recognised as the author of that knowledge and feeling. It is this "I" that will acquire methods for building up forms of alterity or otherness. LDC permits the use of suppositions for postulating favorable conditions in the construction and even co-construction of

projects, thereby facilitating an acceptance of the ultimate consequences, which are the dialogues framed in the cultures and contexts in which the individual interacts. As Mkhize (2008) notes: "Professor Dani Nabudere, of Uganda, refers to the Kiganda proverb, *amagezi si gomu* which, translated literally, means no one has a monopoly of knowledge." In summary, career counseling needs to incorporate indigenous approaches, as well as an in-depth knowledge of contexts, and accept each context or cultural reality as being a center of knowledge. In this way, career counseling will prove capable of recognising the plurality and diversity of knowledge, as Maree (2015:245) states: "We experienced the truth of the words 'people cannot be separate from their environments' and consequently emphasised personal agency and authoring of the community's story."

This approach can help us uncover what are essentially structural principles: (1) generally speaking, the world no longer offers career development, but instead the possibility of undertaking life projects that include working lives – the static concept of a profession (the first paradigm) has been replaced by the dynamic concept of a career (the second paradigm), and present-day reality has to be understood as a complex system of projects; (2) postmodern reality presents us with a series of unpredictable constraints that force the development of adaptive processes; (3) in our current global reality, a career is not equal to the sum of the specific requirements for undertaking a job – today, there is a need to position analytical perspectives relative to the demands of each particular project.

We can also highlight some particular principles in relation to the individual: (1) the individual follows a path made up of projects; (2) the individual, in his or her plenitude, acts through reason and emotion, with particular fears and certainties; and (3) the individual in his or her dialogic relationship with meaning and interpretation (reflexivity) constructs and conducts a counseling process in which each party acts upon, and reacts to, the other. The success of such a relationship is predicated on the adequate specialist training of counsellors. Contrary to traditional approaches, individuals are empowered to construct their selves in the LDC framework, drawing on their perceptions of the reactions of other individuals to them. Of particular importance then is that those others are not considered as something separate. In turn, a sense of the self – channelled through the feedback of others – provides individuals with grounds to organise their understanding of life, including their work life (Guichard, 2009).

In summary, the epistemological statute found in the constructivist perspective is today generally recognised in construction and counselling as a relevant and useful activity that manifests in many different ways (as would any social activity) and is intertwined with a vaster social world. Bearing this in mind, counselling cannot be viewed outside of a consciousness of inter-subjective considerations that give it its place in the paradigms of knowledge –construction and counselling can thus be approached only as a subjective concept as part of a set of objective social realities (Duarte & Cardoso, 2015).

A method for intervention
In not making use of quantitative assessment methods, while emphasising the individuality of the subjective (lived) experience of each individual, the CCI is an intervention method that can easily be adapted to cultural diversity in the sense that the problem of suitable norms for standardised evaluation no longer exists. This form of care career counselling (qualitative methodology) requires counsellors who are properly trained in qualitative methodologies in general and in the evaluation analysis of the CCI in particular.

In terms of the interface between the problems of careers and the difficulties experienced in the other dimensions of a person's life, the CCI allows for a more complete response to the complexities of these various problems and difficulties and opens up the possibility of integrating career counseling into other forms of intervention (perhaps even in those that condition the role of the counsellor). The most important consideration here is finding procedures that can sustain or maximise the gains of these interventions. But is it sufficient to use only the CCI in career counselling? The question and the answer come from Maree (2013:113): "The answer depends on the unique crossroads a client is facing."

There can be no professionally useful relationship without critical reflection and dialogue. Critical reflection is to think (to reflect, to turn back) about our own thoughts and to understand the meaning(s) of things and changes. This can make a valid contribution to new discoveries, new theories, or new procedures regarding how we currently act. In summary, the most important factor at any stage of intervention is the capacity of the specialist not only to pass critical judgement but to be available for involvement in various contexts. These qualities are covered in full in the training provided at universities (Fielding & Bonora, 2000).

In counselling practice, the counsellor needs to foster conditions that can encourage the client to affirm his or her uniqueness and to feel at ease with him/herself as an active party who can contribute to the construction of his or her community (Duarte, 2015). For this to happen, the training of counselors should focus on a core set of competencies. A counselor's operational competencies (Dauwalder & Guichard, 2011) include: (a) clarifying clients'

expectations; (b) establishing the framework and the contract of intervention; (c) conducting interviews; (d) doing syntheses; and (e) devising action plans. A counselor's social competencies include: (a) building relationships; (b) fostering a climate of trust and confidence; (c) being available for clients; (d) identifying the dimensions to investigate; (e) choosing the appropriate evaluation methods; (f) guiding and supporting clients in the process. A counsellor's social and interpersonal competencies include: (a) maintaining personal equilibrium; (b) observing professional deontology; and (c) displaying flexibility and adaptability. Of equal importance to training in the set of required competencies is the need for in-depth knowledge of the unique crossroads clients are facing as well as awareness of the limits imposed by ethics and by counselors' own cognitive, emotional, and knowledge limitations.

Conclusion

Throughout the western story of humanity, stretching from the Garden of Eden, through to classical writers such as Hesiod, Socrates, and Virgil, and even on to the expanded access provided by the internet, questions of who should know what, when, and how remain largely unanswered. In the challenging world we live in today, we need to focus our skills – our analytical skills – on finding answers to questions such as society's responsibility in promoting the wellbeing of the individual. If we are to take Socrates' work, for example, it teaches us that the search for real knowledge does not revolve around information; rather, it is about uncovering the essence and purpose of life. The role of the counsellor is becoming increasingly the exploration of knowledge in principled dialogue with the client culminating in action that, as Socrates put it, leads to our own unique virtue.

Recognising the plurality of the knowledge that exists in all societies is the key to understanding the meaning and interpretation of what counselling is. Counselling should therefore include cultural perspectives and hermeneutic principles in order to promote cognisance of the social inclusion of the individual and his or her contextual experiences.

What we are essentially describing is career counselling as a generator of a form of wealth and individual autonomy; as a material necessity and moral obligation owed to the community; as a factor for social justice through the dignity of the individual to him/herself and to others; as an activity that is dependent on context, or an activity that can benefit from context; and as a situation in which two actors integrate: those counselled, who acts as the subject (Perses), and the counsellor (Hesiod) who acts as the conductor. However, we might point to Zeus, who in postmodern reality can be understood as a metaphor for or a representation of power – be that the State and its laws, or the community and its customs.

Because of its characteristics and objectives, counselling can develop fully only in democratic societies. Not just those that are formally democratic, carefully marked out in relation to the numbers that constitute the *will of the majority*, but those societies that actually promote the *well-being of the majority*. What must be defined precisely in these societies are the rights of those who work as a means of sustenance (which is the case with the majority of people who work) and who have to adapt their demands and needs, but also the obligations of those who exercise power and who are often more concerned about the interests of the organisation than those of the workers as people with their own individual life stories. Essentially, what we must do is focus on the most important task of the counsellor, which is to be useful to clients, providing them with clues that in some way reflect "the other side of the mirror" and that include reflections on their work lives. Only in this way can we talk about societies that are truly democratic and free from fundamentalist attitudes that impede – or condition – the critical capacity of the individual. What we are looking for is quite the opposite: societies that encourage dialogue, reflexivity, thought, and action.

Note

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