The Relationship between Contexts, Finalities, Theory and Innovative Practice in Career Guidance and Counselling

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The relationship between theory and practice in guidance is complex. Guidance practices are actually social practices. This means that they occur within economic, technical, organisational, social and cultural contexts. And these social practices are aimed at certain finalities (social, economic, personal, etc.) which are specific and about which questions can and must be asked.

The fact that guidance practices are social practices has a major consequence: there is no necessary link between theoretical research and guidance practices. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, guidance practices can develop independently of any reference to theoretical models. They may, for example, be based upon diverse beliefs as to the efficacy of a particular type of intervention. Secondly, theoretical research tries to explain 'how things happen' rather than to say 'what ought to be done'.

Any consideration of the links between theory and practice in guidance requires reference to two factors which are very important:

- the contexts in which specific guidance questions arise; and

- the finalities attributed to these practices.

The first part of this paper will deal with the links between contexts, finalities and practices in career guidance and counselling. The second looks at dialectics between theory and practice in guidance. It will show the various types of links between theoretical knowledge and guidance practices during the 20th century.

Links between contexts, finalities and practices in guidance

Guidance practices are responses to social problems arising in a particular society at a certain time. For example, it was certainly no accident that Alfred Binet published a major reflection on guidance in 1908 and that Parsons' book *Choosing a Vocation* was published about the same time (1909). Both seek to answer the same question: In view of industrial development and major changes in work, what can be done to help young people choose the job best suited to them? Such a question could obviously not arise in a rural society where the son traditionally succeeded his father and the daughter her mother.

Three factors seem to play a major role in the emergence of social questions which guidance practices seek to answer. These are:

1. How the education of young people and adults is organised

Different choices have been made in the organisation of schooling from one industrialised country to another. Differences in the structure of educational systems give rise to different scholastic guidance problems and, by implication, differences in the practices of guidance counsellors. Henri Eckert (1993) clearly shows that the practices of German and French counsellors are different because of this difference of organisation.

2. How production is organised

The organisation of work is even more important than the organisation of schooling in its effect on guidance practices. In 1955, the sociologist Alain Touraine published an article describing the three main work systems which have developed during the 20th century: the occupational (crafts and professions), Fordist (after Henry Ford) and technical (automated) work systems. In his article, Touraine shows that each of the work systems can be related to a different conception of 'qualification'. It can also be shown that each of these work systems can be related to a different conception of guidance practices.

The occupational work system at the beginning of the century required workers to possess skills, 'have the knack' and undergo a methodical and long training or apprenticeship. Their work role contributed to the definition of their identity, i.e. being a carpenter or a lawyer was at the centre of their being. In this system, the role of the guidance counsellor was to make reliable and objective predictions about the aptitude of a young person for a craft or profession they would have for the rest of their life.

With Fordism, each worker is an assembly line operative. He no longer has a craft or profession but a job. The notion of 'qualification' no longer relates to their identity as a worker but to the job they do. In this context, the focus of guidance is to determine if the young person can adjust to the working conditions, so guidance tools are developed in terms of values, interests and occupational typology.

Recently, the development of computers has been one of the major factors in the evolution of the production process. It has had major consequences on the organisation of work. Touraine noted that automation has led to the creation of a new work system which he called 'technical'. Within this system, qualification becomes a recognised status in a social system of production. Work activity takes the form of an occupational function inserted into a network. The worker is required to have a number of specific abilities. As noted by Loarer & Huteau (1997) and Zarifian (1988), certain competencies become fundamental. These are:

- sociability and the ability to communicate;

- flexible adaptability and the ability to cope with unexpected events by developing new know-how;

- taking responsibility for results.

In this context, the worker is perceived as having a certain number of competencies but can also get new ones. This leads to the consideration of lifelong learning. Occupational interactions rather than the occupational actor now appear to be central.

Techniques for the assessment of competencies as well as procedures for the validation and recognition of expertise are the key focus of guidance practices in this technical work system. These three work systems have developed in succession over the course of the century. This does not mean that each emerging system gradually took the place of that preceding it. Today, these various work systems coexist. This has a major consequence regarding guidance practices: they can only be pluralistic. They must be based upon relatively heterogeneous concepts and theories (aptitudes, interests, values, lifelong development, competencies, etc.).

3. How ideological conceptions relating to individuals and society have developed

Independently of the organisation of schooling and of production, there is a third context which influences guidance practices: the general ideological context which determines the way in which guidance challenges are conceived. Three of these contexts play a fundamental role in the definition of guidance practices in industrialised countries today:

- the responsibility assigned to individuals for their personal development;

- the pivotal role of occupational activity in identity construction and social integration;

- perception of the future as being relatively unpredictable and unstable.

Most people will find themselves confronted by transitions of various types throughout their personal and occupational lives. This has led to the conception of guidance throughout life for which young people should start to be prepared when still at school. Donald Super (1980) calls it 'life-span career development'.

The notion that each individual is responsible for his/her personal development determines many guidance practices. Guidance activities are focused on the personal development of the individual. Starting from the 'client's request', the aim is to help individuals to make the best of their available assets, taking into account the constraints of the contexts in which they find themselves. It seems fundamental to emphasise that, although this finality seems obvious to us, it could also be different. It is actually possible to imagine very different finalities of guidance practices. For example, one might imagine, at a time when 4/5ths of humankind live in increasing misery, that the objective of these practices could be to encourage collective development rather than individual development.

The purpose of these few remarks is not to settle the question of the finalities of guidance practices. It is only to emphasise that guidance practices, in the same way as any other social practices, necessarily aim at certain ethical, social, economic and political goals and that, at any event, theoretical scientific research cannot define these aims.

The dialectic of relations between theories and guidance practices

The picture just given emphasises the importance of organisational and ideological contexts as well as social finalities in the definition of guidance practices. However, this does not mean that these practices necessarily have no link to theoretical research. Guidance practices certainly are able to develop independently of any scientific research, but the question nevertheless arises of the efficacy of practices with only an empirical basis. This concern has led to the considerable growth of research in the field of guidance throughout the 20th century. Indeed, most of the social questions affecting guidance practices have been modelled within the framework of human sciences and psychology in particular. There is an apparent distinction between two broad categories of

guidance questions which have given rise to major work in the field of psychology. The first series of questions concerns the link between the individual and occupations, and the second concerns the cognitive and identity development of an individual during the various transitions that they experience.

It nevertheless seems that this link between psychology and guidance practices has become somewhat over-stretched recently. Conceptions of the subject underlying many tools used in guidance seem distant from those which now dominate in psychology. Also, the notions and questions raised by certain innovative guidance practices do not give rise to conceptual elaborations or theoretical modelling in psychology.

Differential psychology and the question of the link between individual and occupation

Historically, the first question that guidance psychology had to deal with was that of the link between individual and occupation. As is well known, this question was perfectly formulated by Parsons (1909). From his point of view, the essential scientific question is how to determine what kind of link does exist between individuals and occupations. This expectation of guidance is perfectly consistent with the 'occupational work system'.

This question was formulated scientifically in the context of differential psychology where the individual was considered to be endowed with a stable personality which could be described by a certain number of attributes. Various traits generally lead to the identification of different personality types. In the special field of vocational guidance, differential psychology has led to the specific study of aptitudes, values, interests and occupational types.

The first of these features – aptitude – corresponds with the concept of an essential link between individual and occupation.

Models in terms of values, interests, types, etc. tend in contrast to consider this link as being more of a representative nature. John Holland's questionnaires are the prototypical examples of such a concept. They are the tools most widely used in guidance throughout the world. This model is also at the heart of various guidance software programs and a good many career education methods.

Holland's (1973) basic hypothesis is the existence of six personality types (realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional) corresponding to six types of occupational environment. The dominant personality types of an individual determine the main directions of their educational or occupational choices. The problem is that this approach in terms of types of individuals is too removed from the challenges dominating psychology today.

The question of cognitive and identity development of individuals during transitions

Starting in the 1950s, other questions influenced guidance psychology research. These involved the formation of future intentions and career preferences and the way in which individuals cope with transitions throughout their occupational and personal lives.

The study of Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad & Herma (1951), concerning the formation of occupational choices of boys from affluent backgrounds, was certainly the first in this field. Since then, these questions have been modelled in many different ways, e.g. by Donald Super (1980), John Krumboltz (1979) who was inspired by Albert Bandura (1977), Michel Huteau (1982, 1995) who incorporated George Kelly's (1963) personal construct theories, and Serge Moscovici (1961, 1976).

The question of the individual in psychology today

Most of these career development theories are the result of the construction of guidance questions in a defined conceptual framework, the origin of which is societal. In turn, the development of new concepts in psychology has certainly played a role in the way guidance questions are conceived.

It nevertheless seems that very recently a certain gap has opened up between the concepts of human sciences and guidance practices. A prototypical example is the distance between the conception of the individual as postulated by the currently dominant guidance model, i.e. that of Holland, the chief presupposition of which has been summarised above, and theories relative to the self or identity which now prevail in human sciences.

Three main traits actually seem to characterise the individual as seen today by human sciences (see Guichard, 2000).

Firstly, the individual is a social actor who constructs himself/herself in forms or determining conceptions of self which are organised according to the individual's social insertion in structured fields of social relations. These psycho-social analyses consider that it is impossible to grasp self-schemata without taking into account the diversity of social worlds making up the society in which the person lives, as he/she represents them to himself/herself.

Secondly, the subjectivity of the individual is nevertheless relatively malleable. This is what concepts such as that of the 'working self concept' seek to grasp. 'Relatively' malleable means that the stability or malleability of the 'self' seems to depend upon three basic factors, i.e.:

• the degree of complexity of the society;

- the degree of integration of the various fields of social relations of this society;

- and the variety of interactions in which the subject participates.

Thirdly, when confronted with a changing environment, the individual deploys constant activity seeking identity forms in which to 'crystallise'. This conception of the individual makes the questions which guidance must deal with more complicated. The idea of a client whose main personality dimensions could be described is gradually being replaced by the conception of a 'multivocal' individual (to use the terminology of Bakhtin) whose identity is never permanently constructed.

Should the practitioner's aim be to help the client to stabilise in certain identity forms (as postulated notably by John Holland's model) or, on the contrary, should each individual be helped to diversify the subjective system of identity forms in which they are constructing themselves, as suggested, for example, by Michel Foucault's political philosophy?

Answering these questions will determine the objectives and finalities of guidance practices. But as we have seen, the problem here again seems to be thorny.

Notions without concept, social questions without scientific construction

The example mentioned above shows that the conception of the subject as it occurs in current approaches to psychology and social psychology is different from the models underlying most of the tools used at present in guidance (e.g. questionnaires, software programs, educational methods, etc.).

Reciprocally, during the past decades guidance counsellors have developed innovative practices raising important theoretical questions which research psychologists have tended to neglect up to now.

This applies in particular to the area of practices related to the emergence of the 'technical system of work'. This organisation of work has produced new notions in the field of guidance, such as 'competencies' or 'qualifying organisation'.

This same organisation of work, combined with the rapid evolution of employment linked to globalisation of the economy, has given rise to two major social questions which guidance practitioners have tried to answer. The first is how to help the person to assess their competencies, i.e. how to best help them to review their current situation for the purpose of defining certain personal and occupational goals. The second question is how to give adequate recognition to competencies acquired while employed in this 'work qualifying' organisation.

Up to now, there has been no meticulous scientific work on these questions and the notions they suggest. There is every reason to think that this inadequacy of research is limiting the scope of new guidance practices. Here is one example concerning the notion of competence. This notion is now omnipresent. It is nevertheless an extremely vague notion prompting many questions. What does this notion precisely cover? Should it be preserved overall or must it be differentiated to take into account 'types of competencies' of different natures (e.g. some would be essentially linked to contexts, others to 'abilities' requiring long apprenticeship, etc.)? If the notion of competence can be kept, how many sorts (and which) can be identified? How should we take into account the origin of these 'competencies'? If, as it is postulated, their development is closely linked to interactions in a work context, what part of this development should be attributed to individuals, interactions and the structuring of the context? To what extent are competencies learned in a work situation transferable to another? What are the conditions, obstacles and incentives for such a transfer?

Conclusion: the necessary dialogue between social questions and scientific questions

Four proposals seem to summarise the main points described above:

1. There is no immediate link between theory and practice in vocational guidance. Guidance questions are socially created. They are the outcome of certain contexts and lead to the application of certain practices aimed at ends which may or may not be clearly explained.

2. Scientific constructions of these social questions are most often based upon psychological models. They enable the development of practices which are certainly more effective than 'strictly empirical' practices.

3. Questions which have been and are being dealt with by guidance psychology seem to be closely linked to problems raised by the organisation of work at any given time. The occupational work system of the beginning of the last century led to research into the link between the individual and their occupation – a link which was then conceived in terms of ability. With Fordism, research turned to a less 'essentialist' and more representative conception of this link: concepts of interest, values and types became central. With the technical work system and the globalisation of employment, fundamental questions have become those of the development of personal goals and competencies and flow to

handle transitions throughout life. Many theoretical models have been created on this subject. They have given rise to widely diverse empirical research.

4. Most recently, the link between psychological research and guidance practices has become notably over-stretched. The subject model underlying those tools most widely used in guidance has become distant from currently dominant concepts in psychology. The most innovative guidance practices lead to research questions of major interest. However, they do not appear to have generated much interest among researchers as yet.

This gap between guidance questions and scientific research is very regrettable. Will they come back together? Might applications be found, for instance, in guidance practices for some of the tools designed for today's research psychology? Will currently emerging models of subjectivity give rise to theories or methods constituting a post-modern psychology of vocational guidance? Will the problems raised by the assessment and certification of competencies lead to unexpected developments in the field of cognitive psychology? Developments in psychology could certainly have consequences for the ways in which vocational guidance is conceived and practised even if the link between theory and practice may not be instant.

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Note

A fuller version of this article will appear shortly in the British Journal of Guidance and Counselling.