Rousseau's chains: Striving for greater social justice through emancipatory career guidance

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Drawing on a typology proposed by social philosopher Jürgen Habermas, this article outlines the way career theory, practice and research can be informed by technocratic, hermeneutic, and emancipatory rationalities. The paper builds on this typology by considering Tony Watts' analysis of the socio-political ideologies underpinning career guidance, showing how, despite the in-built tendency for some models to be more socially reproductive in scope, all approaches can engage with emancipatory forms of practice. The paper echoes Watts' observation that career practitioners cannot avoid the inherently normative and political nature of their interventions in people's lives, a fact that calls for a fundamental commitment to promoting social justice.

Introduction

'Man is born free', the French philosopher Rousseau (1762) famously declared, 'but everywhere he is in chains'. In many ways, the unfinished and on-going project of the Enlightenment, of which Rousseau, with all his contradictions, was one of its most eminent exponents, is that of breaking as many of the chains of 'unfreedom' that limit humanity's never-ending search for transcendence. The Frankfurt School philosophers, and 'critical theorists' who have inspired themselves from the writing of the likes of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, have argued that the Enlightenment dream of expanding the freedoms of wo/men across the globe is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of our species: a thirst for emancipation from ignorance, from debilitating social traditions and structures that reproduce and reinforce privilege, and from all sorts of injustice (Held, 1980).

Events in the 'short' 20th century (Hobsbawm, 1994)—not least two world wars and economic models that have depleted the earth's resources and brought it to the brink of environmental collapse—have seriously questioned the 'grand narrative' of science and progress that replaced earlier grand narratives of religion and redemption. And yet, despite the prevailing political cynicism that marks the 21st century, reflected in contemporary social theory that revels in 'post-modern' deconstructions (in contrast to reconstructions) of power (Best and Kellner, 1997), the search for emancipation goes on, and we are far from 'the end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992). Indeed, rarely have we seen, in living memory, such mass mobilisation, starting from the ex-Soviet countries in 1989, the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa in 1991, the anti-globalisation 'occupy Wall Street' movements following the banking and financial debacle of 2008, and the uprisings against home-grown (but often foreign-aided and abetted) dictators across the Arab world in 2010. While post-modern, post-Enlightenment thinkers may very well be right when they argue that 'grand narratives' of freedom spawned by the Enlightenment—including communism and liberal democracy, for instance—often give rise to dystopias, yet the common history of humankind can be read as the constant, unrelenting search for greater freedoms, and from emancipation from all sorts of dominating and exploitative relationships (Marx, in Tucker, 1978).

That striving for increased and fairer access to improved life chances—the 'goodies' of life that include, among other, decent living standards, meaningful work, access to quality health and

educational services, autonomy in charting a life course, respect and status within a community of equals—has been an important motivating factor leading to the development of a number of social practices and institutions that have the potential of facilitating humanity's quest for emancipation. Mass education (and schools), health services (and hospitals), democratic governance (and political parties) are examples of such services that have found institutional expression over the past two hundred years or so. None of these are perfect, and all can be turned into instruments of oppression rather than of liberation.

In this paper, I will argue that 20th century forms of career education and guidance can be considered in a similar light: in other words, as one of the social practices, and institutionalised services, that arose from the same logic and spirit of the Enlightenment, and which, like its 'siblings', has a bright side, but also a darker side as well (Israel, 2009). This article furthermore engages in a constant 'conversation' with one of Tony Watts' most cited papers—one that I regularly use with my students and which I often dig into for inspiration—where he considers socio-political ideologies in guidance (1996a). I argue that deeper awareness of the latter could help us better realise the emancipatory potential in our activities with fellow citizens, in a range of different life contexts.

Images of career education and guidance

Drawing once again on the intellectual traditions of critical social theorists, we can distinguish at least three 'images' that can help us make better sense of the relationships between career education and guidance on the one hand, and social justice on the other. Habermas (1971; Finlayson, 2005), the latest exponent of the previously mentioned Frankfurt School of philosophers and sociologists, provides us with a useful typology: he argues that human action responds to three different interests or 'rationalities', namely technocratic, hermeneutic and emancipatory.

Technocratic rationality is mainly concerned with instrumental control and manipulation of one's environment, where the values of efficiency, prediction and outcomes dominate, and where means are subordinated to the ends sought. *Hermeneutic rationality* highlights human beings' interest in communication, social interaction, and interpretation—the intersubjective 'playfulness' in securing and extending possibilities of understanding oneself and others in the conduct of life. *Emancipatory rationality* addresses mankind's propensity for self-reflection and self-knowledge, the ability to see one's biography as a result of a confluence of internal and external factors that can limit options, a realisation that can be liberatory when such factors are not considered outside human control (i.e. 'reified'), but rather amenable to action that expands our possibilities for self-expression and self-fulfilment.

Each of these rationalities expresses facets of human cognitive interests or learning domains, and all are anchored in what Habermas argues are species-specific (i.e. anthropological) activities rooted in different aspects of social existence, i.e. work, interaction, and power. Habermas moreover contends that each rationality expresses a different type of scientific inquiry, i.e., mode of discovering knowledge and whether the knowledge claims can be warranted. Briefly, technocratic rationality underpins empirical-analytic sciences using hypothetical-deductive theories (e.g. physics, chemistry, biology, engineering, etc.); hermeneutic rationality is expressed by such disciplines as law, history, literature and aesthetics; and emancipatory rationality drives much of critical science, including feminist theory, psychoanalysis, ideology critique and so on.

Habermas is therefore not excluding one form of rationality from the rest—a point that, as we shall see, is relevant to my consideration of the political orientations of career work. He does however take pains to argue that not all human endeavours should be reduced to, or 'colonised' by, the logic of 'positivism', where it is only that which can be measured, controlled, and manipulated that matters, and where a means-ends rationality prevails, at the cost of normative considerations of what it means to be 'human' (Young, 1990).

My contention is that Habermas' typology, especially when read against the background of some of Watts' lifetime work on career guidance, provides us with

a useful set of insights when it comes to considering our field from a social justice perspective. In the first instance, developments in career guidance over the years (as, for instance, categorised by Kidd, 1996; and Arulmani et al, 2014, among others), have, in my view, tended to be inspired by the different rationalities outlined by Habermas—a point which, drawing and adapting from Tinning (1992), I attempt to represent visually in Table 1:

Table 1: Mapping career guidance approaches against Habermas' typology

Type of human interest	Kind of knowledge	Research methods	Career guidance approaches
Technocratic (prediction)	Instrumental (causal explanation)	Positivistic Sciences (empirical-analytic methods)	• Trait-factor • Person-Environment fit • Testing
Hermaneutic (interpretation & understanding)	Practical (understanding)	Interpretive Research (hermeneutic methods)	• Person-centred • Developmental • Life-design • Narrative
Emancipation (criticism & liberation)	Emancipation (reflection)	Critical social sciences (critical theory methods)	• Critical psychodynamic • Opportunity structure • Careership • Advocacy

Trait-factor/person-environment fit approaches, together with other kindred, more sophisticated, but nevertheless equally positivist-oriented models that give testing, prediction, and numerical modelling of occupational futures pride of place, can be said to be closely related to technocratic forms of thinking, and of being. Person-centred, developmental, humanistic approaches, whose most recent expression is the 'life-design' movement (Savickas et al, 2009), rely much more on the communicative 'performance' between counsellor and counselee, where the issue of interpretive construction (and reconstruction) of one's life narrative (Reid and West, 2011), seen almost as a literary 'text', clearly resonates with hermeneutic rationality as previously described.

Critical considerations of the way career education and guidance can serve as yet another instrument to reproduce rather than challenge inequalities, have led to approaches that strive to 'conscientise' citizens about the way societies constrain futures (see Blustein et al, 2005; and Juntunen et al, 2013 for an overview), and limit the very 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004). Such approaches are motivated by an emancipatory rationality that seeks to help citizens 'penetrate' (Willis, 1977) and 'decode' the way social arrangements work in favour of some groups and against others. This 'conscientisation' is accompanied by the mobilisation of resources—including collective social action—to wrest power and enhance capacity for self-determination, to expand 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) thus breaking, or at least weakening, more of the 'chains' of unfreedom referred to at the start of this article.

Emancipatory career education and guidance

In his consideration of the socio-political ideologies in guidance, Watts (1996a) makes a number of points that, read against Habermas' typology, I would like to engage with and develop further. First, Watts argues that career guidance is inevitably political:

> Careers education and guidance is a profoundly political process. It operates at the interface between the individual and society, between self

> and opportunity, between aspiration and realism. It facilitates the allocation of life chances. Within a society in which such life chances are unequally distributed, it faces the issue of whether it serves to reinforce such inequalities or to reduce them.
>
> (Watts, 1996a: 225)

Career practitioners, who would see their task from a merely technocratic or even 'humanistic' point of view, thus ignoring the political implications of their work, can inadvertently reinforce and reproduce inequalities—and indeed often do so. In his paper, Watts acknowledges that, 'at the level of conscious intentionality' most practitioners 'focus on the individual, which … is the natural focus of attention at the point of guidance intervention' (1996a: 228). However he provides a number of examples to show how career-related issues that clients explore with their counsellors are often deeply implicated in, and determined by, broader structures of power based on class, gender, and/or ethnic affiliation. Counsellor response will vary, and can be more (or less) emancipatory, enabling and empowering in scope depending on deeply held—possibly even unexamined—political values and commitments.

The impact of such political orientations works across the whole profession, and not just at the point of encounter with individual clients. Indeed, in another paper, Watts (1999) highlights the way different socio-political regimes, inspired by diverse ideologies, have historically used career guidance—or ignored it—in an effort to either democratise power, or, on the contrary, to block its circulation and keep it within the hands of a select few, as in the case of South Africa under apartheid rule (Watts, 1980). Ultimately, career workers—be they policy-makers, practitioners or researchers—cannot avoid taking a position. Watts (1996a: 226) hammers this point home: 'guidance can be a form of social reform; it can also be a form of social control. There are important choices to be made.'

What Watts helpfully does here is to remind us that career guidance, like many of the social practices and institutions that emerged and took shape after the Enlightenment, can end up having 'reproductive' rather than 'transformative' or 'emancipatory' outcomes. This 'dark side' of the 'children of the Enlightenment' has indeed been a major concern for critical social theory for the past several decades—and indeed has led to some important debates with Habermas, who is seen as the staunchest defender of the Enlightenment, which he considers as the unfinished project of modernity (Passerin d'Entrèves and Benhabib, 1997).

Pierre Bourdieu (2006)—who Yair (2009) calls 'the last musketeer of the French Revolution', has provided us with a whole arsenal of concepts and tools that help us to see how bourgeois schooling, rather than serving as an instrument of social mobility and fulfilling the promise of the French revolutionaries for 'egalité', actually imposes a 'cultural arbitrary' that recognises and rewards only certain types of 'habituses'; perpetrating 'symbolic violence' on those from modest backgrounds who learn that they are 'ignorant', and who therefore end up experiencing the chains surreptitiously imposed by society as self-imposed. Schooling thus ends up being an instrument of social reproduction, furtively but as effectively reflecting the feudal custom of social inheritance of privilege from one generation to the next (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2000). Similar dynamics and processes can be observed at work in career guidance interventions (Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2008).

Similarly, even if drawing on different philosophic traditions and using a distinctive range of methodologies, Michel Foucault (1984) brilliantly showed how the factory, the school, the prison, and the mental asylum participate not only in the same panoptic architectural design, but also in the same underpinning desire to surveil, discipline and punish, where constructions of the self are constrained by state power and discourses, best seen as techniques deployed to position individuals and groups in particular ways. Drawing on Foucauldian perspectives, McIlveen and Patton (2006), for instance, provide us with a critical account of career guidance that draws on Foucauldian perspectives, where career and other forms of counselling are considered, in some contexts and under certain conditions, as an example of society's 'confessional technologies' that can insidiously reinforce control.

Post-colonial, post-structural, post-modern, and post-feminist theories (e.g. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffen,

1995; Gamble, 2006) have deepened and broadened our understanding of power, leading to a better appreciation of its ubiquity, that it is probably incorrect to think of it as a zero-sum game where some have all and others have none, that techniques of power are many and varied and can be deployed in all sorts of ways, and that the exercise of power always breeds resistance.

Such critical perspectives, that problematise the assumption that career guidance necessarily serves the best interests of all citizens, invite us to revisit the issues raised by Watts in his discussion of the socio-political ideologies informing career guidance: *in which way/s does career education and guidance participate in the deployment of power, and on whose behalf, towards which ends?* Here one may be tempted to come to a simple, but probably simplistic conclusion, namely that career education and guidance, as an institutionalised social practice, will tend to be reproductive (in the Bourdieusian sense) if career counsellors conceive their work from a technocratic or even hermeneutic rationality perspective, and are more likely to be transformative if their main inspiration comes from a social reconstructionist, emancipatory view of their profession.

In previous considerations of the relationship between career education and guidance and social justice, I have tended to argue very much along these lines (Sultana, 2014a, b). Indeed, both technocratic and hermeneutic approaches can easily lead to situations where individuals are seen independently from the social forces, economic structures, and cultural traditions that shape their lives in particular ways. While the former is more likely to encourage individuals to adapt and cope and fit in, and the latter to discursively project and construct a 'self' as part of an overall project of life design, both risk failing to place the issue of power—and hence of justice—as a central concern in their relationships with clients.

In contrast, power and justice are at the heart of emancipatory forms of career education and guidance, which give pride of place to raising consciousness, to uncovering structures and patterns of injustice, to providing citizens with the tools to resist, contest, and transform, and to working on the behalf of clients through all sorts of advocacy. Emancipatory career guidance is also more likely to acknowledge (and contest) the enormous impact that neo-liberalism wields as the 'master discourse' of our times, moulding as it does our understanding of selves in relation to others, of justice and fairness, of what it means to be human and what to value, and of how to deploy our capacities as workers.

While there is some truth in this portrayal of the different political 'instincts' that drive the three streams of career guidance practice, as characterised in this article and following the useful heuristic typology provided by Habermas, I suspect that it is both epistemologically and politically/strategically more astute to argue that *all* career guidance approaches *can* (and I would add, *should*) be imbued with an emancipatory spirit. This, in some ways, echoes Watts' conclusion that, at the point of contact with clients, counsellors need to be both political and pragmatic, and it is the 'professional task of the guidance practitioner to identify what is morally and pragmatically appropriate in particular contexts' (Watts, 1996a: 232).

It is instructive to delve more deeply into this political-yet-pragmatic approach that Watts argues for, and which is actually a leitmotif of his life work, and in doing so to also explore in some more detail my claim that an emancipatory tenor can inform different career guidance approaches. My experience with critics of career guidance who hail from the left and who, somewhat like me, are more prone to adopt what Watts (1996a) identifies as a radical (as against a conservative, liberal, or progressive) political stance, is that they are generally dismissive of ameliorative efforts that focus on advancing individual goals and improving individual lifechances, without addressing the broader social and economic structures that limit those lifechances in the first place. They are also more prone to indulge in career-guidance bashing, made by what Watts (1996a: 226) refers to as 'brief visitors to the field, who are concerned with pointing out the gulf between its liberal rhetoric and what they see as being its conservative reality'. Such views tend to portray even the most well meaning career guidance practitioner, researcher and policy maker as a colluder with power, and as ultimately betraying the interests of the very same people s/he claims to be working for.

These portrayals are often quite cutting and demoralising, often leading the 'stayers' in the field—who, to paraphrase Marx, are doing the best they can under circumstances not of their own making and trying to address issues that are much larger than them—to wonder whether they are in fact acting ethically. As a respondent to a paper I wrote recently noted, with frustration verging on anger, chafing at what is often rightly perceived as an arrogant claim to an exclusivity of wisdom and virtue on the part of armchair critics:

> Much of my social justice work has been (quietly) directed at resolving some of the disadvantages experienced by [persons] of low SES [Social Economic Status], rural, and remote backgrounds, including indigenous [groups]. When I managed my […] career service I established an organisation unit for student equity, a very large scholarship program for disadvantaged students, and career education resources for non-traditional students. I believe that one does not have to be a member of the left-leaning critical 'commentariat' to do good social justice work […] In my experience […] all that the left-leaning commentariat do well is whinge about the misery of others' woes and opine how things ought to be according to their moral standards. They feather their own academic nests with publications telling from on moral high, how the rest of the world, we plods, should be and how the government should run our lives according to their high moral standards.

While I think that there is still the place for radical critiques of the kind that trigger the reaction above—and indeed one could argue that they are even more essential as the fundamentalist 'grand narrative' of neoliberalism strives to tighten its technocratic hold over ever larger swathes of our lives—it is important also to avoid an eschatological discourse that sees social justice as a pre-ordained goal that is attained once and for all, according to a set formula, rather than as a 'project-in-process', constantly to be fought for and over, and constantly to be defined and redefined in specific contexts. This understanding of social justice, as proposed by Amartya Sen (2008) among others, opens up the possibility of a more democratic and equal partnership between academics, researchers, policy makers and practitioners of good will, who will strive to mobilise and pool intellectual and practical resources to work in the best interest of citizens.

The emphasis here is on the notion of 'good will', which is not to be equated with a sloppy, uninformed, ideologically neutered stance, but rather with astute and critically aware commitment not just to empathy, but also to empowerment and emancipation as well. In this more inclusive, pragmatically realist but also ethically and politically informed standpoint, it is the principled counsellor who, together with his/her client/s, strives to identify which interpretation of life stories, which reading of events, and which course of action could be most enabling, and most empowering—not from the point of view of a privatised individual, but rather, as in Rousseau's *Social Contract,* as a responsible citizen where freedom is regained inside social organisation.

Thus, a career counsellor working with unemployed clients in a Public Employment Service (PES) may be constrained to focus rather more on placing clients irrespective of their long-term career development interests, and to help them cope, fit, and go through the hoops and hurdles required by workfare regimes—without, however, this impeding him or her from working with individuals and groups in order to deepen the understanding that unemployment is often caused by the very way our economies are structured under late capitalism; that while much can be done to improve one's chances, the state of unemployment is not an indictment of their value as human beings, or of their innate qualities or adopted lifestyles. Indeed, PES staff with a thirst for social justice will often develop contacts with employers, using their networks and social capital to make up for the often-isolated situation that their clients find themselves in. All this might not look revolutionary or system transforming, but there is a significant difference here from a PES employee who opts to be the embodiment of a 'bums-off-seats' policy, works with the assumption that people are unemployed largely due to their own deficits, and fails to appreciate the way contemporary economies and labour markets too often work in ways that increase private profit at the expense of the public good.

Similarly with client-centred forms of career guidance, and the more recent narrative turn in the profession, where life-design approaches see the 'self' as a project rather than as a 'given', and career identities to be 'constructed' rather than 'discovered'. Here, too, a career counsellor informed by an emancipatory rationality and a critical spirit would try to see the links between the client's narratives on the one hand, and the 'grand narrative' that shapes, informs, and constrains the plots that our life story can follow. The political in the personal will in this way be more explicitly acknowledged, addressed and worked with, much in the same way that Paolo Freire (1970), one of the world's foremost critical educators whose approach to adult education is in perfect syntony with the Frankfurt School referred to earlier, would have wanted. Freire is indeed the person who gave us the concepts of 'consientização' (conscientisation), of 'problem-posing' and 'problematising' dialogic educational encounters, and the notion of 'hinged themes', whereby broader, systemic issues are 'hinged' onto the life stories and narratives produced by, in the case of career counselling, the 'clients'.

This, of course, opens up a multitude of opportunities to help each other understand how structures of prejudice in relation to class, gender, ethnicity, beliefs, sexual orientation, age, and dis/ability come together to not only shape the kinds of stories we tell ourselves, but also how such stories 'tell us', i.e. how such socially-produced narratives tell the stories of our lives, putting us, as it were, 'in our place'.

Conclusion

My approach to the challenging question of the transformative capacity of career education and guidance—a question that, as I have shown, emerges from and connects with Watts' depiction of socio-political ideologies, and indeed from much of his life's work—is therefore inclusive and open-ended, acknowledging that a variety of approaches, reflecting the theoretical and personal propensities of those who work with them, and the range of contexts, situations and clients in which they are deployed. What seems to me to be crucial, however, is that whatever approach is adopted, the political is not divorced from the personal, given the profound conviction, which I share with Watts, that the personal *is* political, and the political is inextricable from what is often experienced as deeply and uniquely personal. Watts (1996a) articulates this by arguing for the bringing together of the insights from psychology (with its tendency to focus mainly on individuals) with those from economics and sociology (with their explicit focus on groups, structures, and social contexts)—thus enhancing the profession's potential of being of authentic service to citizens in relation to their efforts to construct a meaningful life, in which work plays a significant if not central part.

From the perspective of critical career counselling, then, the offer of guidance services cannot be touted as a set of competences that are expertly mobilised in a social vacuum. Neither does this skill set constitute a theoretical approach that can be deployed, irrespective of continent, condition, or context. It is well nigh a truism, and hopefully a fact that hardly needs recalling, that theories are steeped in the worldviews of those who articulate them, and that in career counselling, the mainstream theories still have, as their assumed clients, white, middle class males in western industrialised and urban societies (Sultana, 2011). In contrast, Appadurai (2007: 168) reminds us that barely 20% of the world's population 'have the privilege of choosing among career options, examining their options critically, establishing educational preferences, placing bets on different knowledge paths, and changing careers as a consequence of their capacity to benefit from high-end knowledge about knowledge.'

Such statements serve as a timely reminder that the task of emancipatory career guidance services, how we conceive of our work, how we theorise it and practice it, needs to be reimagined and reinvented in the different contexts that take into account the many intersections between the global and the local, the systemic and the endemic, the larger picture and the specificity of the presenting challenge. Habermas' claim that the project of the Enlightenment is far from complete, and that the desire for instilling more socially just contexts that enable the flourishing of human capacities has been far from satiated, drives all of us in the career guidance field to carefully consider the options that Watts calls our attention to, and to seriously engage with the demanding yet vital task of breaking free of Rousseau's chains.

Notes

1. I owe this notion of linking personal narratives to the 'grand narrative' to Professor Torfi H. Tulinius, an expert in Icelandic sagas at the University of Iceland—though both of us agree that the notion of 'grand narrative' remains problematic.

2. Here we are not raising the question of the extent to which work is meaningful, the increasing demise, for many, of access to 'decent work', and whether the very notion of a 'career' has become an anachronism (see Sennett, 1998; Bauman, 2001)—a theme that is raised in a number of publications by Watts (e.g. 1983, 1996b, 1998).

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