

# From mutualism to individual competitiveness: Implications and challenges for social justice within career guidance in neoliberal times

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The beginning of the twentieth century was a time of great societal and social change in the US. Many people struggled to find their way in a transformed and rapidly transforming society in which there was an increasing divide between the rich and the poor. Parsons and the social reformers of his time were advocates for the poor, youth, women and disadvantaged, and (Parsons, 1909) understood his vocational guidance work with individuals within a broad vision of social change. Over time, career guidance has been criticised for its lack of attention to this broad vision of social change, being more and more individualised in its practice. The changes of the 21st century have been described as neoliberal with focus on global competitiveness and increased individual autonomy. This article examines the roots of career guidance and the implications and challenges of social justice within career guidance in neoliberal times.



## Contextual discourses

Historically career guidance has been related to education and employment and is now linked to policy agendas such as lifelong-learning. This has led to a marked need and desire for a clearer professionalisation or professional organisation of the career field (Gravås & Gaarder, 2011). Recommendations for formal qualifications and competency criteria for counsellors are suggested by professionals in the field (Schiersmann et al., 2012). State authorities aim at formalising and creating an evidence knowledge base concerning career guidance services, and introduce such curricular frameworks as

'Career management Skills frameworks' (Hooley, Watts, Sultana, & Neary, 2013). These are national initiatives, much inspired by the OECD (OECD, 2004) and the The Council of the European Commission (2008) and ELGPN (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network). In this context, political discourses include the idea that every citizen should pursue a career and that career guidance should serve the knowledge economy and seek to increase individual's human capital and capacity to compete. This article will focus on the roots of career guidance, and on the context in which the concept of careers was established and developed. In doing this, the article explores the challenges which career guidance faces in making a contribution to social justice.

Social justice is a slippery concept. Sultana (2014: 7) notes that:

Career guidance... can claim its lineage within that historic arch of Enlightenment social dreaming that we now refer to as 'modernity', where individuals are encouraged to carve out dignified and fulfilling lives for themselves, irrespective of social origin, gender, ethnicity and other hitherto ascriptive factors. Within such a discourse, 'social justice' has particular connotations, relating to the meritocratic distribution of material resources and life chances in ways that reward ability, effort, and achievement.

And Irving (2015: 7) asserts that:

A just society would be one in which the constraints of oppression and domination are eliminated, allowing people from all groups to develop and reach their full human potential... (with the) inclusion of processes and practices

that: facilitate group recognition and participation; accommodate an equitable distribution of material goods; and actively respect multiple ways of living.

Thus, social justice is linked to ideas of just societies with no oppression or domination, with the aim to help everyone develop and reach their full human potential. This puts career guidance in a central and delicate position in terms of advocacy and social activism.

## Career guidance and mutualism

Frank Parsons was a consistent opponent of that individualism which pits men against each other in the struggle for existence, and an earnest advocate of that individuality that fits men for useful membership in the social body, and so draws them together in mutual fellowship and service. (Kent, 1908: 636)

Frank Parsons, regarded as the founder of modern career guidance, belonged to the US progressive movement. He saw career guidance as a social instrument, but also as an individual service that could create active citizenship, hope, solidarity and harmony. His community involvement led him to stand for election as mayor in Boston in 1895 for The People's Party. The progressive movement fought for a more just society by focusing on societal change and helping individuals. In 1906 Parsons gave a lecture titled 'The Ideal City', where he outlines the need to help young people in their choice of profession, and Parsons was subsequently asked to draw up a systematic plan for professional counselling. Thus, in January 1908 the Vocational Bureau was established (Zytowski, 2001). The Vocational Bureau exemplified the progressive spirit, aiming to help individuals and the city of Boston.

All over the USA such social justice oriented initiatives were flourishing, as a reaction to the abhorrent conditions, in particular in the booming cities. One critic was the well-known author of *How the Other Half Lives*. Jacob Riis gave an account of the living and working conditions in New York slums (Riis, 1890/2004). Parsons was another critic, among many. Career guidance was seen as a tool for social justice in a society with huge

gaps between the rich and the poor (Davis, 1964).

Parsons' vision was of the harmonious society, where everyone is a fellow-citizen in a working fellowship of solidarity. Everyone is a partner in a broad, extended family fellowship and all should be able to develop their optimal potential for the good of all. This society demands that each individual's potential is developed. As Parsons (1894: 2) noted 'each child [should] be fitted for life by an education carefully adapted to his partial genius and capacities, and will be given full opportunity to discover his true sphere of labour and occupy it'. Parsons actively opposed the fierce competition of his age and saw career guidance as a tool which about his vision of the harmonious society.

## Psychometric techniques and social justice

The movements in Boston and elsewhere can be seen as a intertwined discourse between philanthropic movements and Protestantism, one in which morality and faith are central to the way one's life is led. Choice of work is seen in terms of a vocational call. Individuals should make their vocational choices for the glory of God and the good of mankind. It is in this way that harmony and success can be attained.

As Parsons' theories of vocational guidance became institutionalised and spread, however, they became more clearly associated with a positivistic rationality (Plant, 2009). Thus, psychometric techniques were applied, and the way to testing was paved. This particular approach has maintained its prominent position in career guidance and counselling since the publication of the book *Principles of Physiological Psychology* (Wundt (1874): psychometric institutes and testing were established in most industrialised countries. In this 'scientific' approach, and armed with aptitude, intelligence and interest tests, psychometrics were regarded as a new way of creating social justice, i.e. a meritocracy on a scientific basis, as opposed to earlier favouritism and nepotism, which were seen as signs of social injustice. Advocates of psychometrics maintained that they represented social justice for all, as their work was based on solid scientific evidence (Plant, 2009). Critics of testing, however, were never convinced that there was much of a correlation between the results of the testing, and the test of real

life experience (Gergen, 2001). On the contrary, they would see testing as another instrument of social injustice. Critics argue that many tests reproduce the existing social order, based on the social bias of the test constructor, his/her social background, and on the normative traits which are inherent in testing materials (Michell, 1999). In these terms, testing runs the risk of being transformed into a sophisticated instrument of social injustice (Plant, 2010).

## The autonomous and skills-oriented citizen

Modern career guidance, test-based or not, started as a part of the progressive movement with a rationality based on social justice, citizenship, solidarity and harmony (Davis, 1964). In contemporary political discourses the notion of career comprises both the creation and management of one's career, and there is a suggestion of a change in career guidance policy (Bengtsson, 2011; Kjærgård, 2012). The OECD, for example, points out that 'A key challenge for policy-makers is to shift their career guidance systems to adopt a broader perspective, emphasising the promotion of people's capacity to manage their own careers. This is consistent with the view that the role of governments in democratic societies is to help citizens to manage their own lives, not to manage their lives for them' (OECD, 2004: 139). Here the OECD focus on a re-adjustment of career guidance policy by pointing to the manner in which the welfare state practically pacifies the population, advocating a neoliberal welfare regime that to a greater extent promotes the individual's own ability to take control of his/her own life and career (Kjærgård, 2012).

From an emancipatory point of view, individuals could be viewed as autonomous in shaping their own lives: social class and societal structures are of little importance, and career guidance is part of this emancipating process. On the other hand, the autonomy discourse represents a withdrawal of the welfare state, backed by the notion that the welfare state creates dependant and passive clients: 'There is no such thing as society, there are only individuals and their families' (Thatcher, 1987). With this approach the responsibility for careers failure or success is placed on the individual, and less so on societal structures (Bengtsson, 2011; Kjærgård, 2012).

Likewise the Council of the European Union states: 'Career management skills play a decisive role in empowering people to become involved in shaping their learning, training and integration pathways and their careers. Such skills, which should be maintained throughout life, are based on key competences, in particular 'learning to learn', social and civic competences – including intercultural competences – and a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship' The Council of The European Union (2008: 8). In these terms, CMS is presented as an empowering instrument, aimed at active citizenship. These aims resonate with the progressive movement of more than 100 years ago, which focused on active citizenship, education, and work. The citizen of today is represented as an autonomous individual and a co-actor in the management of career development through the self-management of his/her own career (Bengtsson, 2011). The contribution that guidance makes is that (...) 'it can contribute to empowering individuals to manage their own career paths in a more secure way in the context of today's labour market, and to achieve a better balance between their personal and professional lives' (...) (The Council of the European Commission, 2008 p. 2). Guidance is here seen as enabling individuals to manage their career paths, and as helping to create a better life/work balance. So, what is the connection between career guidance and social justice in the 21st century, and how does this appear in practice?

## Career guidance and social justice in the 21st century

When Frank Parsons and his colleagues started up various tutoring programmes related to community participation, education and work in the early 1900s, it was primarily among the poor and immigrants, and with the goal of creating a more just society (Davis, 1964). Even today career guidance is connected to concepts like social justice, advocacy and sustainability. In 2013, for example, the International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance, IAEVG, issued a communiqué on 'Social Justice in Educational and Career Guidance and Counselling'. Likewise, the EU's Resolution of 2008 on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies points out that major challenges remain in terms of social integration and equal opportunities in education and work.

European policymakers, like Frank Parsons, emphasise that career guidance should help individuals to find his/her place in society and in a vocation. The EU seeks to achieve this by fostering active citizenship and career management skills. Social, civic, or intercultural competences are pivotal in lifelong career guidance because they are a basic part of managing a lifelong career.

Inspired by the progressive movement in the US in the early twentieth century and its focus on social justice, a renewed discourse may emerge where career guidance is perceived as a tool for active and lifelong citizenship. To connect career guidance and social justice there is a need to focus on a holistic life-long approach and active citizenship. The Parsonian approach focused on matching, adaptation and mutualism; a neoliberal approach would focus more on competition, individualism, and autonomy.

## Individual and society: a dual vision

According to Tony Watts (Watts, 2015) career guidance is a profoundly political process, and it operates at the interface between the individual and society. Watts has offered four alternative approaches to guidance from a socio-political perspective (figure 1), the dimensions of which are individual/society, and change/status quo. Thus, the dual functions of career guidance are addressed, and this provides an opportunity to problematise political goals and practices within career guidance, and its relation to social justice.

**Figure 1:** Watts' (1996) socio-political ideologies of guidance

	<b>Core focus on society</b> (macro and meso)	<b>Core focus on the individual</b> (micro)
<b>Change</b>	Radical (social change)	Progressive (individual change)
<b>Status quo</b>	Conservative (social control)	Liberal (non directive)

In Lovén (1995) survey among Swedish practitioners, the majority viewed guidance work as, in principle, non-directive and individually focused, whereas the main emphasis in practice was on the societal status quo aspects. Arthur, Collins, McMahon, and Marshall (2009) found similar views in their study on Canadian career practitioners' views of social justice and barriers for practice. By contrast, the political intentions with guidance activities focus on change, in terms of both society and the individual. The European Commission (2008) points out that career guidance should contribute to policy goals within education and employment, and a Norwegian law states that career guidance should help to reduce social inequality, prevent dropouts and integrate ethnic minorities (Educationlaw, 1998) .

These examples point to the fact that career guidance practice is challenged by policy-makers to become more proactive, especially in relation to vulnerable population groups. Career guidance should promote equal opportunities for all, where all people are given a lifelong opportunity to participate in education and employment. This political rhetoric views career guidance as a soft instrument for steering society. Such an instrument should encourage change at both the societal and individual level. The question is, of course: How far should this go? And how far will policy-makers allow this to go? From a social justice perspective, career guidance practices should focus on change with a view to ensuring that no one is excluded or exclude themselves from education, employment, or from their chosen path in life due to social background, gender, age, or ethnicity. Possible steps towards this vision may be found in emancipatory career guidance approaches to which we will now turn.

## Career guidance as a tool for citizenship, emancipation and advocacy

Parsons, as we have seen above, was part of the progressive movement. He saw career guidance as one way to a more just society. In the present situation, with 'careerquakes' (Watts, 1996), rapid movements in societal tectonic plates, new technologies, and a more individualised society, expectations are focused on

entrepreneurship, flexibility, and autonomy. With this backdrop, inspiration can be found in Parsons' vision of mutualism and citizenship. Career guidance can be re-invented as an instrument of social justice. As in Boston, we also see a growing number of immigrants; a growing gap between the haves and have-nots; and an increase in the number of people without education or work. Our theoretical and practical approach in career guidance needs to be geared towards the present situation. Careerquakes are the order of the day, and career guidance can play an active role in this picture in terms of emancipatory approaches and advocacy.

## Emancipatory career guidance

Emancipatory guidance implies, as the words says (free from bondage, oppression, or restraint; to liberate) that guidance has a role to play in terms of liberating the talents of each citizen, and thus societal forces. This can be seen narrowly as picking the best individuals for the competitive society. In these terms, the concept of emancipatory guidance on a humanistic base has been criticised for being naïve: people do not choose among options: they are chosen and selected by gender, class, etc. Grounded in opportunity structure theory, Colley (2003), Willis (1977), and Ken Roberts (1995) assert that 'choice' is constrained by social class and education limiting individuals to certain occupations: '...people's prospects still depend very much on their family background, their qualifications from their initial education, where they lie, their gender and their ethnicity' (Roberts, 1995: 82). With such overwhelming constraints, career education and career guidance are considered largely futile by Roberts. Career education and career guidance are much too weak instruments to counter such overwhelming powers as the dynamics of the labour market, and of the global economy. However, whereas such views may provide an insight into the powerful constraints that many clients experience, they may also provide the basis for empowerment and emancipation as important elements in careers work. This point links emancipation to awareness-rising, and to taking a stand. There is no impartial position: 'Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral,' as Paolo Freire

(1985: 122) so famously declared. With this observation, the ideal of the neutral or even objective counsellor vanishes. There is no such position. Many scholars, from different standpoints, have dealt with emancipatory guidance in various ways. Most recently, Sultana (2014; 15-23), drawing on Habermas, distinguishes between:

*Technocratic rationality:* instrumental control, efficiency, prediction and outcomes

*Hermeneutic rationality:* communication, social interaction, and interpretation

*Emancipatory rationality:* self-reflection and self-knowledge, biography as a result of internal and external factors, action that expands possibilities for self-expression and self-fulfilment

This latter part of the citation above leaves much room for personal and societal changes, based on self-reflection, group-reflection, and on similar well-known guidance activities. Other scholars have pointed to the emancipatory aspects of the communication between client and counsellor, based on conditions such as empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951). Similarly, (Peavy, 2005) working within a constructivist mindset, bases his practice on compassion, cultural attunement, respect, authenticity, and disciplined mindfulness. Gottfredson (2002) pointed to the societal and psychological forces leading to circumscription and compromise, i.e. creating an awareness of processes of narrowing life options, thus limiting social justice, in particular for females. Barrie A Irving and Malik (2004) aimed at promoting social justice in the global economy: so called 'realistic' choices, made at the age of 16, may well limit the scope of choices, thus limiting social justice. With social justice as an underlying theme, Plant and Thomsen (2012) focus on the emerging social control aspects of guidance practices and policies, as do Plant and Valgreen (2014). And Irving (2015) sheds critical light on social in/justice within career education. All these scholars deal with social justice from different angles. Where do these insights lead us to? They point to both the limitations and the options in terms of the many roles of career guidance, which include information, assessment, advice, counselling, careers education, placement, referral, advocacy, feedback and follow-up (Bartlett et al, 2000: 21).

## Advocacy and Feedback

From this list (above), *Advocacy* and *Feedback* are the most controversial ones in terms of the potential policy-making aspects of guidance. They are both linked directly to the focus on social justice, and they both imply a proactive model of guidance in which guidance practitioners may find themselves in opposition to the actual systems in which they work. This is where guidance as the Trojan Horse comes rolling in (Plant, 2005). *Advocacy*, for example, may imply that a guidance practitioner stands up for his/her client, and talks and writes on behalf of the client in trying to rectify the injustice that may affect the client (Barham, 1998). Such injustices may, in fact, be one of the by-products of the system itself. Schools, for instance, produce dropouts, i.e. pushouts (Plant & Oomen, 2014). Yet, school-based guidance practitioners may find themselves acting to counter, not only the act of the individual dropping out, but also the mechanisms that drive students to drop out: a potential conflict.

Similar situations may arise in relation to *feedback*. This guidance role entails that guidance practitioners actively give feedback about the (mal)functions of the systems of which they themselves are employees. This could include criticising the curriculum in schools, suggesting new routines or projects, via feedback based on evidence on the actual performance of the systems. Most educational and labour market systems do not take such feedback favourably: it upsets the functioning of the systems. However, it is an important guidance policy goal in this context to further social inclusion, i.e. to counter social exclusion and further social justice (see fig. 1). Some guidance professionals have this obligation written into their ethical guidelines. The Swedes, for example, in their Ethical Declaration Sveriges Vägledarförening (2004) expressed a radical view on this: 'It is the moral obligation of the guidance counsellor to be on the side of the weak and vulnerable in society, and, if needed, speak on their behalf...in public'. In this case, the Trojan Horse concept is embedded in the ethically based societal inclusion and compensation role of the guidance practitioner. This obligation points to a bottom-up approach to policy making, in which the client and the guidance professional do not see themselves as victims of societal systems and of top-down policy making, but rather as active citizens working together to change the system from within,

in order to combat social exclusion and to further social justice. Interestingly, the above-mentioned EU-Resolution on lifelong guidance (EU, 2004) repeats the goal of guidance to focus on those in particular need of such help, including the low-skilled, migrant workers, and people in the third age, but it does not specify how this goal may be obtained. Such policy leaves the guidance practitioner and regional/local managers to operationalise policies from a bottom-up perspective.

## Conclusions

So, which contributions can career guidance offer today in terms of social justice: 'Frank, where are you, now that we need you' (Gummere, 1988)? Guidance has a long tradition of combating social injustice and of furthering social inclusion. Frank Parsons pointed to the emancipatory effects of career guidance, both in terms of the individual's liberation and in terms of creating a socially just and balanced society. Today, we need to re-vitalise career guidance along these two dimensions: emancipating individuals and focusing on structural and societal injustices. This implies a more proactive practice, which is a challenge for guidance – both in practical and in policy terms. If guidance is to play a more significant role in terms of formulating and implementing social justice and inclusion policies, and not just patching up social exclusion, guidance may need to play the role of the Trojan Horse in the very systems of which it is an integral part. It requires a strong professional foundation to fulfil this role; one which also includes the clients' perspectives, thus adding a bottom-up perspective to social justice aspects of policy and practice.



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