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The practice portrait – a method for promoting social justice in practice

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The ability of the individual practitioner to grasp how her own practice is interwoven with different societal structures and interests can be seen as the first step on the way to social justice. This article investigates how the practice portrait can be used as an analytical and practical method to nurture this ability. The practice portrait was developed within the tradition of critical psychology to reduce the gap between research and practice by giving voice to practitioners in various social practices. In this article, I use the practice portrait alongside practitioners at a university career centre.

Introduction

There exist rival understandings of social justice, both in philosophy and in practice (Sultana, 2014). Few inquiries take into account the perspectives of career practitioners regarding social justice (Irving, 2011). One that does is the inquiry into the competencies career practitioners apply to address the barriers experienced by their clients, as well as competencies the practitioners would like to strengthen in this regard (Arthur, Collins, Marshall and McMahon, 2012). Arthur et al. find that many practitioners try to integrate their views on the struggles people are dealing with into ways of working in practice, but that career practitioners feel restricted in terms of their roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, Arthur and her colleagues find that it is important to translate the concept of social justice into practice roles and specific interventions; the practice portrait can be regarded as such an intervention. However, it is not an intervention into the lives of the beneficiaries of career guidance; it is an intervention into career guidance practice at the meso-level. Finally, Arthur et al. place considerable emphasis on negotiation when they conclude:

> According to the participants, the professional education of career development practitioners must be matched by negotiation with funders, policy-makers, and managers who oversee public and private agencies to consider where and how the value of social justice could be incorporated into service delivery (ibid. 2012: 151).

In 2013, the Board of Directors for the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance released the IAEVG Communiqué on Social Justice in Educational and Career Guidance and Counselling, acknowledging the everyday work of many practitioners, but also underlining that '…although each of us has roles and responsibilities towards social justice, we need to address the structural and societal barriers that continue to oppress people, requiring leadership and collective efforts' (IAEVG, 2013). As such, IAEVG also stresses the importance of structural and societal barriers, leadership and collective efforts.

This article introduces the idea of practitioners and researchers engaging together in portraying specific career guidance practices in order to identify possibilities for action and change and ways of assuming responsibility towards social justice collectively. The aim of this article is threefold: firstly to introduce the idea of the practice portrait to the wider international community of career guidance practice and research, since the majority of the published literature until now has been in German or Danish; secondly to develop a version of the practice portrait which can be applied with career guidance practices; and thirdly to contribute to the discussion

on how career practitioners are empowered to act as agentive practitioners, conscious of the way in which social justice is an inherent part of their daily practices.

The practice portrait

The practice portrait was developed within the tradition of Danish/German critical psychology and its practice research methodology which, according to Nissen (2000), is based on Marx's new materialism and has his Theses on Feuerbach (Marx, 1973) as its epistemological foundation. The methodological development was especially inspired by the 6th thesis: 'the essence of humanity is no abstraction inherent in each individual', but, in reality, 'the ensemble of social relations' (Marx and Engels, 1977 in Nissen, 2000: 146), and the 11th and probably most cited of the Feuerbach theses: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it' (ibid).

The Practice portrait was developed by a group of researchers in Berlin and Copenhagen researching psychological practices and working closely in tandem with practitioners whom they also encouraged to publish their own work. However, describing what was going on in practice was difficult without resorting to esoteric language or abstract generalisations. To support and enhance practitioners' voices in the development of psychological practice, a group of researchers and practitioners established the so-called Theory-Practice-Conferences (Markard and Holzkamp, 1989) which ran biannually over a ten year period led by, among others, the Danish psychologist Ole Dreier. At the Theory-Practice-Conferences, practitioners and researchers developed a way of describing practices based on the practitioners' standpoints. This was named The Practice Portrait, but the goal of the practice portrait was broader than merely portraying psychological practices in a descriptive manner; through systematic descriptions and interrogations of daily practices which preceded the descriptions, the goal was also to suggest changes to practice (Markard et al., 2004). More specifically, these changes should make psychological practices work for the oppressed and the vulnerable; an approach which is in line with critical psychology and practice research since

> The background of practice research is a critique of the inequality, distance, and hierarchical connections between research and practice that isolate research from social practice and regard the results of research as standards for improving practice. Similarly from this perspective, science has been criticized for producing abstract, irrelevant, and decontextualized knowledge (Højholt and Kousholt, 2014: 3).

Instead, practice research is viewed as a situated practice and ideally a joint venture that should not 'be reduced neither to a research methodology nor to a means of strategic development of a practice' (Nissen, 2000:170).

Therefore, an explicit goal of conducting a practice portrait is to identify potential collective actions and efforts in the endeavour to develop diverse social practices as a common good and work towards an inclusive society.

As such, the practice portrait is a comprehensive method that consists of a large set of questions which practitioners answer together in order to describe, analyse and discuss their own practice. The questions are organised in four themes: 1) the institution and the conditions for work, 2) the theoretical and practical cornerstones of daily practice; i.e., theories, methods, technologies and procedures, 3) specific situations at work, and 4) internal and external communication regarding practice. For this article, I decided to instigate a collaboration with career practitioners at a university career centre in order to learn how the questions in the practice portrait could be developed so as to be relevant to career guidance practices and to enable the collective of practitioners to grasp how their practice is interwoven with different societal structures and interests, and therefor has the potential to contribute to a more inclusive and socially just society. The next section presents the initial stages of a joint inquiry into university career guidance.

Collaboration on a practice portrait with a university career centre

I was invited to come to a university career centre to talk about career competences (Thomsen, 2014). I realised that this could also be a chance to engage in a practice portrait in order to share the practical experience with the readers of the NICEC journal in terms of laying the ground for discussions of potential interactions between research and practice meeting the idea of the 11th Feuerbach Theses. Therefore, I asked the career practitioners or career consultants as they call themselves, if they would be interested in doing a practice portrait together. And they were! Informed consent was sought in writing and the practice portrait was conducted using a semi-structured group approach, and then audio recorded. Two career consultants, a student and a trainee took part in the interview. They comprised the daily staff at the career centre. One additional career consultant called in sick that day. Prior to the interview, I chose to include a fifth theme on the beneficiaries and target groups in addition to the four themes mentioned in the previous section. Each of these themes was explored so as to allow for detailed description and discussion of practices at the university career centre. The themes each include a set of sub-questions adapted to the specific practice. For example, the first theme 'the institution and the conditions for work' had the sub-questions: Who works here? Which functions do you fulfil? How is the career centre placed within the university organisation? How is it managed? Describe formal/informal structures. After engaging in the practice portrait, I was able to reformulate the sub–questions, making them more relevant to career guidance practices, but also to the exploration of social justice in practice. Figure 1 illustrates the adapted version of the practice portrait developed on the basis of the collaboration activity and inspired by Markard et al. (2004), Bechmann Jensen (2005) and Petersen (2009). The adapted version has six themes because I found it important to describe specific procedures at work, including the question: 'Are considerations on gender, ethnicity or social class part of activities?'

The recording was summarised in order to describe the career guidance practice at the university career centre. I will now give a brief insight into the work with the practice portrait followed by a discussion of the results and, most importantly, a revised version of the practice portrait adapted to career guidance practices. In line with the critical psychological focus on first-person perspectives, the narrative is written from a first-person standpoint (Thomsen, 2012).

THE UNIVERSITY CAREER CENTRE

Our university career centre consists of three permanent members of staff, two student assistants and one manager. Organisation wise, we are under the Faculty of Arts with 10,000 students enrolled. There are formal structures which do not play a major role; more important are the informal structures that we establish and maintain through personal relations with, for instance, directors of study. We ourselves have different master's degrees, but all from the university where we are currently employed. Some of us have completed an internal course on career guidance. A centre similar to ours can be found at the other faculties, and this centre is particularly linked with the career centre at the Faculty of Business and Social Sciences from where we get a lot of inspiration since we used to be one centre and were only recently split up (2015). In the beginning, there was a lot of copy and paste from the practice at this previous centre, but now an 'artsification' of the activities is taking place. We do not have a written strategy or a vision for our work yet - there might be something in the documents produced around the time of the new centre's establishment. We offer a range of activities, many of which we refer to as events, which we develop to meet the needs of the students. Examples include 'Thesis to go', CV seminars and introductions to Linkedin. Other activities are career guidance interviews with the career practitioners from the public employment centre and the unions, and integrated career courses aimed at developing the students' career competences by integrating career learning activities into different study programmes. We also produce newsletters, maintain a Facebook group and homepage, and collect, systematise and analyse data on our activities. We try to stay on top of labour market information by subscribing to

Theme	Questions
1. the practice, the purpose and the organizing of the practice	Describe the career guidance service/practice/center. What is the purpose of the work in your opinion? Should/could the purpose be different? How has the purpose developed over time? What is the goal of the career guidance practice? If relevant How is the practice placed in the organization? What are the formal and informal structures? Give examples? Who work here, how many and where? How is the work organized? How is the work divided between you? Are there planned changes in the division of work? Give examples.
2. target group	Describe the target group for the career guidance practice, what problems, needs or challenges do they face? Has this changed over time? If yes how? How does your activities relate to the target group? (here the interviewer pick up on different target groups) Who can be supported? Give examples of successful activities. Who can't be supported? Give examples of unsuccessful activities. What are your suggestions for improving practice? And with a special focus on those citizens who faces the biggest challenges see from your perspective. How do you evaluate whether practice has achieved its goals? (or the purpose as you described it previously)
3. specific procedures in the work	How do you reach the target group? Who refer to you? How do you market the practice? What is the first contact? How do you introduce the practice and yourself? What is the role of social media/ICT? What happens next? What is the extend, the length and the frequency of the contact? How is the contact ended? What are the limitations to your involvement? What are the options of relevant referral? How are they used? Who gets referred where and why? Are considerations on gender, ethnicity or social class part of activities? If not why do you think that is, if yes give examples.
4. the theoretical and practical ground pillars of the daily practice i. e. theories, methods, technologies and procedures	Do you work with/in specific theories and methods? If yes how and please give examples. Do you have 'freedom of method' or one method that everybody should follow? How does this affect your work? Which rules or principles apply to your work? Give examples. Personal grounds for the work. Do you have rules, principles, guidelines or values that you (individually) value in your work? What are they and how are they expressed/present in the daily work? How do you develop the practice? (compulsory og voluntary) reading of literature, conferences, continued education and training. Do you discuss your individual work amongst you? How has work developed over time? What's the difference between individual and group interventions? When do you use the different forms of organizing?
5. specific situations a work	Periods of too much to do and periods of too little? What does working with career guidance mean to you? Does the work involve conflicts of any type? With users/citizens, students, teachers, researchers, management, collaborators, parents, yourself? Or internal conflict such as conflicting roles? Give examples of content of the conflicts and possible solutions to them. How do you handle difficulties? Can you turn to colleagues, management, and supervision?
6. collaboration and communication about the practice internally and externally	How does the communication among colleagues and among colleagues and management take place? Including communication with management elsewhere in the organization? How is knowledge and information shared between colleagues and among colleagues and management? How do you communicate with your target group/users? With media are used? How do you communicate labour market information? Information on different live styles and forms? How is knowledge about collaboration with different partners shared with users? And how is knowledge about users shared with different partners? Give examples.

Figure 1. Practice Portrait - Career Guidance Practices

newsletters and by speaking with the employers, stakeholders and unions when we participate in activities together. We are not inspired by specific theories and methods; maybe we integrate our different theoretical backgrounds into the work. We do a lot of project management.

Due to the limitations of an article, it is not possible to share the whole practice portrait, the above narrative draws mostly from the beginning of the interview and is intended to provide readers with little knowledge of university career guidance practices an insight into the organisation and the activities of the practice. As you can see the practice portrait is not about painting an ideal picture of a university career guidance centre but about describing this specific career guidance practices as close to the way they are described by the practitioners as possible, without making it into a mere transcript of the interview. The interview furthermore includes dialogues on the target group, how the activities offered fit the target group, what resources

are available and the participant's personal motivations towards the work. And a discussion involving all participants evolves around students identification with the many different academic fields comprising the Faculty of Arts and how this relates to the building of professional identity or not. Finally there is a short discussion on the absence of career guidance theory and methods ending with an evaluative question addressing the career practitioners' participation in the interview.

Of particular interest to this article on developing social justice in practice are two themes: namely the descriptions of the beneficiaries or target group and the personal meaning of the work in the career centre for the practitioners. Sultana has previously discussed the importance of the words we use to describe participants in career guidance practices (Sultana, 2011). Here, the word target group is used because the question that started this topic was 'please describe the target group of your work'.

TARGET GROUP

> In principle, all students are our target group and we interact with approximately 3,000 of the total 10,000 students. This can be interpreted as a few or as many depending on the perspective. We often discuss that some students 'want to play' and others do not. Should resources then be spent on those who do not seek to engage or maybe even oppose? We constantly look to develop new activities aligned with the needs of the students. We work by trial and error. In general we find that all students could benefit from career guidance and we have not met any students who find unemployment attractive. Among the 10,000 students, there might be groups we do not even know of yet. We see the integrated career courses as a way of reaching all students.

PERSONAL MOTIVATION

> I think it's awesome that we can support our students in getting the work life they dream of. Many students have dreams and visions and are super talented people. This is just something that is a little bit difficult for many. It is like opening a door to a dark room; you don't know how big it is or what you might bump into along the way. I think it's cool to equip them with a torch that enables them to navigate.

Lessons learned

Reflecting on the methodology, it is now clear to me that the practice portrait is one element in a collaborative research and development process, and that the practice portrait makes little sense as a standalone activity. The initial approach was to conduct the practice portrait as a group interview. Other researchers suggest that the questions should be answered in writing, submitted to the researcher who then constructs the practice portrait based on the written information (Petersen, 2009); others again propose a process consisting of both a group interview and written practice portraits followed by qualitative interviews (Bechmann Jensen, 2005). Further it takes time to engage in a practice portrait! We spent approximately one hour, but we could have spent more time. Interestingly enough, it led to the agreement that I would summarise the interview and we agreed to meet again to look at the practice portrait together and have a sort of meta-dialogue. Hence the practice portrait methodology fulfilled its first purpose: to support the establishment of a dialogical relationship between researchers (me) and practitioners (the four people at the career centre) and establish the foundation for a joint venture of research and development.

This brings me to further lessons learned: when the interview was transcribed it became clear that we did not speak much about social justice. So what would be the strength of this type of engagement in a social justice perspective?

Discussion

From the interview we learn that the university career centre and the practitioners at the centre perform

valuable work and organise activities that students appreciate. We also learn that few of them are trained within career guidance, and don't see themselves as part of a professional community of practice with an associated body of theory. So even though the career guidance community believe that social justice is to be promoted in all career guidance practices (see for instance IAEVG 2013) it would make little sense for me as a researcher to assume an expert position and point to all the things that this university career center is are currently not doing, not reflecting on or simply not aware of; one of which being the relationship between social justice and career guidance practices. Social justice is not a decontextualised theory, it is a stance (Sultana, 2014: 322), and stances are not merely stated and applied to practices. At best, they are developed as reflective practices, integrating knowledge about structural barriers as they are experienced by different student groups in their transition to the labour market. Those experiences are often shared in the public debate and sometimes reflected in research. Therefore, we have different sources of knowledge that can be discussed in a joint venture between researchers and practitioners.

The interview reflected an ideal among the practitioners at the career centre to assist *all* students in smoothing their transitions to the labour market. At the same time, practitioners were aware that some students seek out their assistance and some do not. The non-participants could be sources of inspiration for the development of practice in a social justice perspective (Thomsen, 2014). In terms of structural challenges in the Danish career guidance system and labour market, interesting research exists that could be discussed in the joint venture. Topics could be: patterns of segregation that continue to constitute a problem of inequality of educational opportunities, with children of privileged families maintaining a relatively higher level of access to more prestigious university programmes (Thomsen, 2015); gender inequalities that, by and large, can be attributed to the dynamic effects of childrearing in terms of earnings and labour market participation of women among other factors (Kleven, Landais and Sogaard, 2015); that universal access to career guidance in lower secondary school increases overall admission rates to upper secondary education with significant increases among immigrants (Hoest, Jensen and Nielsen 2013), and that career guidance in primary school it likely to be gender biased as nine out of ten career practitioners in Denmark believe that young people makes career choices based on gender and six out of ten acknowledge that gender plays a role when offering guidance on the choice of upper secondary programme (Zuleta and Krohn 2013). Also injustice in the graduate labour market is a relevant topic with Hooley (2015) arguing that university career guidance should provide students with the tools and knowledge to critically examine labour market structures.

When the university career practitioners speak during the interview of equipping students of higher education with a 'torch', it becomes increasingly interesting what this 'torch' will shed light on; that the light should not only help reveal the students' hopes and motivations, but be used to navigate the potentially restrictive structures and challenges which they will encounter, and hopefully overcome, upon entering the labour market. In conclusion, the potential of the practice portrait rests with the joint venture. For me, coming from a critical psychological perspective on research, this means that I will not just publish this as a finding in an article, but take an active responsibility to share my findings with the practitioners at the career centre and openly discuss our various understandings and, based on our shared investigations of practice as presented in the practice portrait, explore new possibilities for action.

Earlier on in this article I characterised the use of the practice portrait as an intervention at meso level highlighting that I wasn't referring to typical activities in career guidance practices intervening at micro level aiming at engaging individuals in reflections on education and work. To merely publish the findings would on the other hand be based in the idea of an intervention at macro level assuming that the discussion would find its own way to the relevant practices and make a difference there from professional and academic journals. By suggesting framing the engagement in the practice portrait as an intervention on meso level I am looking to explore methodologies that allow for me as a researcher to assume responsibility to open up discussions with practitioners about social justice. This first use of the practice portrait with career guidance practices in a university career center confirm that interventions

can and needs to be done in solidarity and respect in order to establish a common curiosity about the specific practice in question and possible relations to social justice issues.

Therefore, when it is suggested that there is a shared and collective responsibility in the career guidance community to translate optimisms of the will into grounded understandings of the possibilities of enacting social justice (Sultana 2014) I believe that engaging in practice portraits might be a fruitful first step that can be taken by researchers and practitioners together.

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