Career construction and reduction of psychosocial vulnerability: Intercultural career guidance based on Southern epistemologies

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Latin American theories of career guidance draw heavily on Northern epistemologies, though they articulate with such approaches by taking the context of the global South into consideration. Based on experiences and research conducted in Brazilian public high schools, this article highlights theoretical and practical underpinnings for an approach to intercultural career guidance that addresses psychosocial vulnerability and social unfairness. Inspired by Boaventura de Sousa Santos's intercultural ideas and by a social constructionist perspective informed by Southern epistemologies, the framework presented in this article expresses a Latin American critical perspective and aims to make a contribution to the social justice agenda, as an alternative to traditional goals of 'adjusting' and 'adapting' to careers, or 'educating' for them.

Introduction

Despite recent developments and greater stability in countries such as Brazil and Colombia, Latin America is still characterised by education of poor quality, and by a labour market with high rates of unemployment and underemployment, with many opportunities available only in the informal, unregulated sector (World Bank, 2013). The possibility for exercising career planning and for benefiting from career guidance are rare, relevant only to a minority élite while the majority of the population has to deal and cope with situations of psychosocial vulnerability (Castel, 2000; Rascován, Levy and Korinfeld, 2013; Antunes, 2015; Ribeiro, Uvaldo and Silva, 2015; Ribeiro, 2016).

Psychosocial vulnerability can be understood as 'a decrease in the possibility of making bonds and social networks, not a personal fragility, nor institutional, but relational' (Ribeiro, 2016: 82). It does not come from predetermined situations, but rather it is produced through specific 'intersubjectivity contexts' or spaces where relationships – whether social, cultural, labour, economic, and/or symbolic – are enacted in ways that generate vulnerability, as people face difficulties in establishing bonds in dimensions of their lives, such as their working lives.

How can one offer career guidance in contexts such as these? How can career guidance services be organised in the absence of any systematic support from public policy? Such a policy vacuum is the case with public elementary and secondary education in Brazil (Silva, 2010; 2011). In such a situation, career guidance projects are likely to remain limited to private education institutions that work with young people from the middle and upper classes. It is only in exceptional circumstances that lower middle class and poor people in the public school system can benefit from such services.

Career guidance for middle and upper class people in Brazil has been inspired by classical theories produced in the global North. Such approaches emphasise individualised forms of guidance that generally seek to support students in their choice of college for further education. Typically, such approaches draw on trait-factor and developmental theories (Brown et al, 2002).

An alternative approach to career guidance aims to support people in the choices they can make within contexts marked by psychosocial vulnerability, helping beneficiaries to think about future projects within

the broader working world. These guidance activities generally occur in group contexts and/or within an institution through projects and programmatic initiatives using Latin American theories and tools (Bohoslavsky, 1977; 1983; Bock and Bock, 2005; Rascován, 2005; González Bello, 2008).

This second mode challenges mainstream career guidance and counselling theories and practices, and quite frequently produces innovative approaches that articulate the epistemology of the global North with contextualised theories from the South (Silva, 2010; Ribeiro, 2013; 2016). Such a critical and dialectical dialogue between these contrasting approaches can also be productive when it comes to thinking through the relationship between career guidance and social justice (O'Brien, 2001; McMahon, Arthur and Collins, 2008; Sultana, 2010).

This article engages with this alternative approach to career guidance with a view to confronting psychosocial vulnerabilities and situations of social injustice. We here draw on examples taken from a school-based project in order to highlight a number of theoretical and methodological issues. Central to this approach is the notion of 'interculturality'. In the next sections, we first explore this core concept as articulated by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Santos, 2001; 2002; 2014). We then present the theoretical and practical underpinnings of our proposal. This is inspired by a social constructionist perspective, such as that proposed by Blustein (2006; 2011), but re-viewed through the lens of Southern epistemologies, particularly those developed within the Latin American critical tradition (for a preliminary overview see Silva 2010; 2011 and Ribeiro 2013; 2016). The latter tradition, which focuses on human rights in the face of diverse forms of oppression, includes critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; 1975), psychology of liberation (Martin-Baró, 1986; 1994), critical psychoanalysis (Bohoslavsky, 1977; 1983; Rascován, 2005; Rascován, Levy and Korinfeld, 2013), and vulnerability and human rights framework (Ayres et al, 2006; Paiva, 2013), among others.

The intercultural approach

A major influence in the efforts to develop Southern, and specifically Latin American perspectives of career

guidance, has been Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Santos (2009) has argued that our times require new epistemological, ethical and political positions, and some of his propositions have particular relevance to the field of career guidance.

A key argument is that we should challenge the dominant epistemologies and the universalising pretensions of many career guidance theories. Most of these have been produced in the global North and work in such a way as to homogenise the world through the obliteration of cultural differences. Instead, our position is that we should acknowledge, in a more serious manner, the implications of context.

A second point derived from Santos (2014) highlights the fact that we need to recognise the existence of small cracks in the dominant logic and, consequently, value epistemological pluralism. The world is epistemologically diverse and this diversity provides intelligibility and intentionality to social experiences – including to career guidance interventions and their outcomes.

Thirdly, it is important to recognise and acknowledge the production of epistemologies of the South because they have distinct criteria for the production and validation of knowledge. Santos (2014) named the contemporary production of theories as an 'ecology of knowledges'. It is based on the premise that *all knowledges* (and here it is important to stress the plural notion of knowledges) have limits and that their production should be accomplished by means of dialogue between different knowledges embodied in distinct social practices.

For Santos (2014), responses to contemporary social and cultural demands can only come from the possibility of relational and intercultural constructions of theories. The so-called 'intercultural dialogue' requires and assumes both mutual recognition of different cultures in a given cultural space and readiness for dialogue through processes of co-construction. Indeed, we understand culture as a symbolic system and organiser of social life through shared knowledge, values and practices.

'Co-construction' establishes mutuality and the possibility of constructions of distinct forms of understandings. An example from the field of career

guidance would be the process of decision-making. This should be the outcome of dialogue between those involved in the helping relationship, i.e. between the career guidance counsellor and the guided students. It should not only be based on the counsellor's professional knowledge, because everyday knowledge – what could be referred to as 'unscientific' understanding – is as important as scientific knowledge.

Co-construction and mutuality highlight the importance of conceptualising knowledge as relational, what Santos (2014) refers to as 'inter-knowledge'.

The rationale of an ecology of knowledge(s) and of intercultural dialogue is echoed in contemporary perspectives of social constructionism as articulated by a range of key Latin American authors. In the education field, for instance, the same principle of interculturality and relational ontology underpins Freire's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed. In 'dialogic education', a 'process of awareness' results from the dialogue between teachers and students, all of whom are considered to have significant knowledge.

For authors from these perspectives, the central issue for professional interventions and for the production of theories is how to resolve the tension between regulation, on the one hand, and social emancipation on the other. In the case of career guidance, the main question is how to make it an emancipatory space without imposing hegemonic ways of being. Santos would refer to such imposition as 'top-down globalisations', in which the conception, the values and the dominant discourses are inflicted upon everyone (Santos, 2002).

In the field of career guidance, the traditional procedures aiming to adjust, adapt or educate as proposed by classical theories produced in the global North are examples of this logic of social regulation. Within this mind set, career guidance counsellors use their knowledge to help the other – often, however, without allowing the co-construction of knowledge by the students being guided.

The central task for an emancipatory action within an intercultural perspective would therefore be the transformation of the theory and the practice of an *imposed* hegemonic logic – what Santos (2002) refers

to as 'globalised localism' – into a counter-hegemonic logic of 'co-construction' – akin to what Santos (2002) calls a 'cosmopolitan project'. Our view is that it is on the latter logic that career projects for social justice can be built by means of intercultural dialogue. Both the guided student (or group of guided students) and their career guidance counsellor should acknowledge a deep sense of incompleteness, with each one having the capacity to equally contribute to the guidance process.

Social relations are always both intercultural (produced 'in between') and political (representing unequal distributions of power). Valid knowledge is therefore contextualised knowledge; it is valid when it considers cultural differences and political differences (Santos, 2014).

Thus, the key point is that knowledge is produced in relation with, and from within, the context, without the supremacy of any form of knowledge over another. It should be oriented toward reality, which is taken both as a starting and an arrival point. According to Santos (2014: 31-32), 'global social injustice is, therefore, intimately linked to global cognitive injustice. The struggle for global justice must be therefore a struggle for global cognitive justice as well'.

How, then, should one think about an intercultural career guidance that contributes to the social justice agenda in the field? How should the intercultural principle be considered in the field of career guidance? In addressing these questions we will first consider some additional theoretical underpinnings before presenting what we have learnt from experiences carried out in Brazilian public schools.

Theoretical underpinnings

In general terms, the proposed model of intercultural career guidance emerged through an engagement with contexts marked by inequality and psychosocial vulnerability among disenfranchised Brazilians. Our action was guided by a desire to develop a productive relationship between Northern and Southern epistemologies, and specifically through an engagement with social constructionism and critical Latin American theories. In the process of trying to think through the notion of the co-construction of the self in the

world, four theoretical foundations helped organise our framework. As discussed in a preliminary way in Silva (2010; 2011) and Ribeiro (2013; 2016), these theoretical foundations consisted of (1) Relational ontology, (2) Narratability, (3) Intercultural dialogue, and (4) Conceptualisation of the guided student as the subject (rather than the object) of choices, discourses and rights – keeping in mind that in the Brazilian tradition, the notion of 'subject' integrates the idea of agency with the idea of citizenship, i.e., a subject is a person capable to regulate his/her own life (Paiva, 2005; Ayres et al, 2006).

Each of these four elements in our theoretical framework is briefly explored below.

Relational ontology

'Relational ontology' refers to the notion that most knowledge is produced in daily practices, rather than constituted as abstract knowledge. Freire (1970), for instance, pointed out that the production of knowledge takes place in human praxis, so that a pedagogy of the oppressed is 'not a pedagogy for him, but with him' (Freire, 1970: 9). Taking this on board in our field would mean that career guidance is done *with* others, not for others or by others.

Reality would thus not be objectively established but intersubjectively constructed by means of relational processes (Ribeiro, 2013). The focus here is neither the person nor the context, but rather on addressing what happens in the relationship when people are in contact, in a dynamic of people in context (Paiva, 2013). Consequently, relational ontology considers the reality of a relationship without neglecting a degree of independence between the personal and the social dimensions, as the social constructionist perspective points out (Mcnamee and Gergen, 1999).

Applying such a perspective to career guidance would mean that the focus of the process would be neither the guidance counsellor, nor the guided students, but the relationship established between them as well as its outcomes.

Narratability

In order to provide a relational and intermediate space so that each person is able to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct career narratives, as proposed by

Rascován (2005) and Savickas et al (2009), career guidance should enable the co-construction of his/her 'narratability' (Savickas et al, 2009).

Narratability is not an individual skill, but a relational ability to narrate one's life story with meaning and significance shared with others. Each life story should be recognised and validated as a career in a context responsible for generating otherness … otherwise, the narrative is not recognised as socially valid. It is not a self-construction, but rather a co-construction of the self through one's relationship with others. Thus, the narratability is psychosocial, not individual.

Intercultural dialogue

Career guidance is a communitarian proposal organised by and with the guided students and others involved through conversations about projects and career plans. The assumption here is that career guidance can be offered by someone from a different cultural group than those who it is done with (Rascován, 2005).

As Silva suggests (2010; 2011), when discourses impose values or activities that are outside the acceptable interpretations, or impose meanings on a particular social group without listening to their experiences in daily life, such an attitude is likely to be oppressive rather than emancipatory for the person and/or group involved. Hence, it is important to understand the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and social class, produced in contexts of inequality and psychosocial vulnerabilities as key elements to intercultural dialogue. Paraphrasing Freire we can say that career guidance has to be forged *with* others, not *for* others (Freire, 1970: 32).

The guided student as a 'subject'

Students who are being guided are persons in relation. As such, they engage in intercultural dialogue in order to co-construct a position in which they are the subject of discourse. Their narratives in this process should be validated and recognised. This situation consequently makes the student-as-subject a 'rights holder' (Paiva, 2013), potentially transforming him/her into an agent of his/her own choices. This has important implications for the practice of career guidance. As Bohoslavsky (1977: 47) notes, if we

acknowledge a person as an 'agent of choices, we consider that the choice of the future is something that belongs to him/her which no professional, no matter how skilful s/he is, has the right to expropriate'. This should constitute the ethical norm underpinning career guidance.

In synthesis, the main objective of career guidance is to provide support for the co-construction of a place in the working world negotiated via intercultural dialogue. This stands in contrast to views that would define guidance in terms of supporting adjustment, adaptation or even education in relation to one's career.

Such an approach would generate awareness of the main attributes of equality and inequality, marked as these are by the intersectionality and consubstantiality of class, gender and race. In Silva's words: 'the awareness of social place, gender and skin colour attributes at work fosters the person's ability to place himself/herself as a subject of his/her educational and professional future' (Silva, 2010: 177).

This framework – which focuses on the four themes of relational ontology, narratability, intercultural dialogue, and 'student and subject' – provides us with some of the conceptual tools and lenses needed to develop ways to support each person's career projects within contexts marked by severe inequality. Within the framework of the Southern epistemologies referred to in this proposal, knowledge is not conceived in an abstract way, but as a practical knowledge arising from contexts marked by psychosocial vulnerability. It is to such practical considerations in the articulation of intercultural career guidance that we now turn.

Practical underpinnings

Ribeiro, Uvaldo and Silva (2015) have summarised the Latin American proposals for career guidance based on Southern epistemologies and have proposed that the diagnostic or development logic underpinning approaches to career guidance in the global North should be replaced by the identification of vulnerabilities, and that the focus of intervention should not be on the person but on social bonds.

Thus, the intervention is designed as a psychosocial intervention that transforms the career guidance practitioner into a communitarian worker rather than a traditional counsellor. Such a practitioner is particularly skilled in mediating psychosocial support processes rather than in providing individual guidance. He or she acts as an intermediary between the guided student and the career possibilities that are to be built in the working world, often by joint action with and through the community. As Ribeiro, Uvaldo and Silva (2015: 202) note, career guidance workers use such community-based action to 'help the persons in socio-occupational vulnerability to achieve educational and labour goals through sharing support and acting as intermediary for the relationships between them and the community actors and institutions'.

In other words, those providing career guidance act on the basis of relational knowledge production emanating from intercultural dialogue, helping students become the subjects of their choices. This can happen because such choices are co-constructed jointly between the career guidance counsellor, the guided students and the communities in which they are inserted or want to insert themselves in.

In such a situation, the career guidance counsellor no longer occupies the safe and secure place of 'the one who knows'. Rather the counsellor has to leave the position of 'guide' to assume that of the 'intermediary'. As such, counsellors facilitate the articulation of the mainstream culture with the local culture – what Santos (2002) refers to as 'cosmopolitanism logic'.

The practical approach proposed for career guidance from this Southern perspective thus has five assumptions based on the four theoretical foundations that have been presented above. Each of these assumptions is briefly explained below:

First, intercultural career guidance is based on personal narratives articulated with social discourses. It should assist the student to co-construct a personal narrative of his/her own life story, which connects the individual experience with the social forces that have shaped it.

Second, it focuses on the process, because understanding the personal process of constructing projects is more important than defining a specific project at a given life moment.

Third, it constructs contextualised concepts and practices with instituting function without imposing or applying a predefined strategy. It is not an existing strategy, which is simply applied in the current counselling situation. It is always built through a relationship between student and career guidance counsellor based on the knowledge of both.

Fourth, it works based on a 'diatopical hermeneutics' (Santos 2002). This is a key principle for intercultural career guidance, and refers to the process of interpretation (hermeneutics) carried out between persons or groups in different and unequal socio-cultural positions (*di* – two and *topoi* – positions or knowledge production places). In this relation, intercultural dialogue is generated between different and unequal knowledges (e.g., between the technical expertise of career guidance counsellors and the everyday knowledge of guided students). A good example of this is when a person whose working life is predominantly marked by informal jobs, seeks help to think about his or her career. Counsellors usually have little personal experience of work in this precarious sector of the labour market, and therefore require the everyday knowledge of the counselee to be able to help him or her in the process of building career projects.

Finally, intercultural career guidance proposes an intersubjective validation of knowledge with the guided student as the protagonist in the process. Career guidance is preferably carried out by means of group and communitarian strategies that potentially generate a 'web of meaningful exchanges…as a possible space of support to the differences, as a meeting place and respect for diversity' (Rascován, 2005: 124). As we have already noted, and following Santos (2014), the contemporary construction of knowledge should be the task of everyone, i.e., there should not be some that are more able than others to produce knowledge, even taking into account the fact that the different parties in a particular interaction have different levels of competence and responsibility. Instead, there needs to be a recognition that everyday knowledge is legitimate, and that co-constructors of knowledge are all in a situation of mutual incompleteness.

Strategies and approaches that include the use of 'intersubjective interaction scenes' (Paiva, 2005), of

'communitarian groups' (Rascován, 2005), and of 'psychodynamic groups' (Lehman et al, 2015) are examples of intercultural career guidance practices that take into account the above-mentioned theoretical and practical proposals.

The key principle underpinning intercultural career guidance is further illuminated if we take the liberation psychology developed by Martin-Baró (1994) into account. For the latter, the possibility of emancipation is neither action taken by someone on behalf or in the place of others, nor is it self-liberation. Rather, it is an enabling encounter of liberation, a shared action that is performed co-intentionally, in which both are engaged subjects in the act.

The exchange is not only between different knowledges but also between different cultures, i.e., the exchange is between universes of different meanings, based, for instance, on one's experiences of gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity and social class culture. Therefore, exchanges in intercultural career guidance informed by this perspective have a dialogical and psychosocial quality about them, because career projects are the outcome of mutual interaction between two partners: the career guidance counsellor and the guided students in a given community. Both are engaged in a process of 'co-construction', what Santos (2001) also refers to as 'mestizo knowledge'.

Conclusion

Our proposals regarding intercultural career guidance are based on a productive exchange with both Northern and Southern epistemologies, and especially between social constructionism and critical Latin American theories. We have outlined four basic theoretical foundations: relational ontology, narratability, intercultural dialogue, and the guided student as a rights holder and as an agent of choices.

We have argued that intercultural career guidance should identify psychosocial vulnerabilities, take into account the cultural differences between people, and focus its interventions in helping students construct and reconstruct their bonds and social networks by means of an intercultural dialogue. In addition, such forms of career guidance require collaboration with

the community, with the career guidance counsellor acting as a communitarian agent.

In conclusion, we highlight the importance of thinking of career guidance as intercultural, contextualised and plural. It recognises the intertwined and intersectional nature of race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, and social class – dimensions which cannot be separated from each other in any meaningful manner when considering social injustice. This means that intercultural career guidance cannot really divide and sort out people according to some of these dimensions; nor should it create specific strategies for each group, such as career guidance for Latinos or for lesbians. Rather than that, the whole point behind intercultural career guidance is to bring people together to deal with the differences from the perspective of diatopical hermeneutics, taking strength from a counter-hegemonic logic of cosmopolitanism in order to jointly face situations of psychosocial vulnerability and social injustice.

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