

# The last thing they need is career counselling! Critical reflections on interventions for the inclusion of marginalised people

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**This** article examines interventions for the inclusion of marginalised people, through a presentation of the results from a small-scale exploratory study into the lives and careers of female sexworkers and survivors of modern slavery. Data (field notes, narratives and visual data) was analysed with the *Listening Guide*, a voice-centered relational method, and visual analysis methods. Results suggest that reaching out to the communities and enabling multiple channels for interaction can deliver meaningful support to the lives and careers of people considered marginal. Based on the results, implications for practice are further discussed, and a different approach is suggested.



## Introduction

Given current global challenges, such as the socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a high risk of inequities and exclusion increasing in society. To address this, societies need to invest in their people, especially those in precarious situations, such as those who are at risk of exploitation and long-term marginalisation through modern slavery. Poverty and social injustice are complex phenomena, rooted in cultural and political structures, which need to be addressed on macro, meso- and micro-level (Roberts, 2004; Sultana, 2014).

Career practitioners, working directly with people at the micro-level, have a unique opportunity to help people 'invest in their futures and to overcome structural and societal barriers' (International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance

[IAEVG], 2019), and to 'promote equity, fairness, compassion, respect and justice for all, whatever their economic status' (Irving, 2016, p.8).

This study explored the life and career development of one particular group of marginalised people living in Norway, sex workers and survivors of modern slavery, and the interventions aimed at this group. The research questions were 1) What are the participants' perceptions concerning the women's needs for support? and 2) What kind of interventions seem to support the women's life and career development and facilitate inclusion? Research data was produced through ethnographic, narrative and creative participatory methods. Research questions were answered by adopting the *Listening Guide* (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017), a voice-centered relational method, and visual analysis methods (Mannay, 2016).

## Career interventions for marginalised people

In career counselling, interventions for the inclusion of marginalised people tend to be preventative (i.e. trying to stop young people from pursuing a path that will increase inequities and exclusion) or reintegrative (i.e. trying to bring excluded groups back into society) (Watts, 2001). The role of career guidance in the social and work inclusion of marginalised people goes back to the field's origins. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century philanthropists reached out to migrants and those living in poverty, offering charity and personal forms of mentoring. Frank Parsons (1909), considered 'the founding father' of vocational counselling, established the Vocation Bureau in Boston (Hartung & Blustein, 2002) and inspired

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many to see 'career as fit' (Pryor & Bright, 2011), career development as linear, and career choice as a controllable cognitive activity.

We seldom hear about Helen Bradford Thompson Woolley and M. Edith Campbell, who advocated for social justice and could be considered 'the founding mothers' of career guidance (Burns, 2009). By 1921, these women had created one of the most progressive programs in the USA, at the Vocational Bureau of Cincinnati. Here, they provided career counseling, protection and services to many marginalised groups, the physically and mentally challenged, juvenile delinquents, women and children.

Following on from these early examples, career guidance has been strongly engaged with social justice and the inclusion of marginalised people into work and society. Recent work has focused on celebrating this tradition of social justice and providing it with stronger theoretical underpinnings (Hooley et al., 2018, 2019).

Despite this strong social justice tradition, career is often seen as a normative concept which is not easily accessed by those outside of the mainstream. Career is considered an individual endeavor and a linear trajectory, from school to work and through the labour market. In this understanding, some people, the young and homeless, paperless refugees or survivors of modern slavery, do not seem to 'fit in'. If the idea of career is not made accessible to them, there is a danger that they become 'invisible' to career guidance services and practitioners.

The alienation of some groups, from career guidance services, is particularly clear in relation to those who have been coerced into work or who operate mainly in the informal economy (Watts, 2015). The global business of modern slavery, facilitated by digitalization and modern technology, generates a yearly profit of 150 billion US dollars (Kara, 2009; Drejer & Bales, 2018), through exploitation of approximately 40.3 million victims, including 9000 in Norway, mostly in fishing, agriculture, construction, tourism and sex industry (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2017; Arnegaard & Davis, 2019; Norwegian Agency for Development of Cooperation (NORAD), 2020).

Modern slavery is rooted in economic and political structures and needs to be approached strategically

on multiple levels, through international cooperation with a long-term perspective (Drejer & Bales, 2018; Arnegaard & Davis, 2019). The Norwegian government has made efforts to combat modern slavery, through international and domestic initiatives, involving local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to provide legal guidance, health services and housing (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

In many cases, complexities of documentation make it less likely for victims to access welfare services, and some refuse help for a variety of reasons, often related to the complexity of their personal circumstances (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2007). Sex workers and survivors, often facing stigmatization and exploitation (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2007), have an understandable mistrust of services provided by the state and NGOs. Survivors who consider pressing charges against their perpetrators, are allotted a 'reflection period' and a temporary residence permit. The majority, often illegal immigrants, are forced to return to their country of origin, and in danger of being re-trafficked (Brunovskis, 2007, 2012).

## An exploratory study

This article reports on a small-scale exploratory study (van Halteren, 2018) conducted by the author, a professional artist, educator and career practitioner. The object was to gain insight into the life and needs of a particular group of marginalised people, survivors of modern slavery, and to use these insights to inform career counselling practice.

The study had a qualitative research design, including creative research methods (Mannay, 2016). The combination of (non- and) participant observation, interviews and participatory visual data production, enabled the collection of data from multiple sources at various times. Prior to commencing the study, ethical clearance was obtained. Participants, all adults, recruited through NGOs, were informed and gave consent to use and disseminate data. NGO staff-members assisted the author during field work. NN, in charge of the women's shelter and group-meetings, became a key informant and door opener to the 'invisible' people.

The author attended ten weekly group-meetings (approximately three hours each, organized and led

by staff-members) with 5–15 people who identified as female, (former) sex workers and survivors of modern slavery (hereafter called women) in Norway. She observed and participated in group-activities (meals, mingling and meditation) and had several individual ‘career conversations’ (inspired by, but not based on Savickas’ (2015) counseling manual) with two women, in their habitat. They were asked to describe their childhood, educational and work-experiences, current situation and imagined future. In addition, they were asked to describe what and/or who they needed to realise their (career-) dreams.

Supplementary thematic interviews were conducted with four female staff-members from two NGOs, involved in interventions for the inclusion of this group. Furthermore, eleven women (three chose to observe) and four staff-members participated in a workshop. They were asked to choose and assemble elements (e.g. photos, text, coloured paper) from magazines provided, to create an A3-collage, depicting their present or future self. This researcher-led creative activity was designed to be non-invasive, facilitate reflections on personal identities, and cultivate a sense of community.

The study generated a large collection of data produced by the researcher (photos, fieldnotes, audio-recordings) and by participants (collages). Recordings were transcribed, auteur-checked and analyzed with the *Listening Guide* (Gilligan et al., 2003; Gilligan & Eddy, 2017), a voice-centered relational method, grounded in psychoanalytic theory, ‘intended to systematically interpret the many layers of voice contained within a person’s expressed experience’ (Gilligan et al., 2003, p. 157). This method consists of a series of steps, each requiring active presence, responsive listening and a desire to engage with the storyteller.

1. Listening for the plot, the “scenery” in the narrative: what happens where, when, why and with whom. Who or what is missing, what themes, metaphors or images are used, what is the sociocultural context, are there contradictions or silences?
2. Listening for the I and the rhythm in the storyteller’s voice: How does the I behave and act in this “scenery”? Here, *I-poems* are composed by highlighting and separating every

I-phrase (subject and verb) from the narrative, and listing these in the same order, starting a new line with each phrase, like lines in a poem. This, in order to discern what is not explicitly uttered, but core to the narrative’s message.

3. Listening for Contrapuntal Voices. This means listening to the quality or musicality of the storyteller’s voice: are there different voices, interplay, harmonies, dissonances and tensions with parts of itself? ‘This step not only picks up on what is being said or what may be silenced. Listening for different voices and their counterpoint further nuances our understanding of the data by resisting binary categories or dichotomies.’ (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p.79). Here, research questions are used as a touchstone to identify the voices that are relevant for the inquiry.
4. After multiple listenings, results are assembled to compose an analysis. Here, the researcher returns to the research questions, asking “what was surprising and if so, what was it and why?” This brings back her own voice and creates a string of evidence, connecting the questions with the interpretation.

The results (themes, contrapuntal voices and I-poems) were used as points of reference for the analysis of the collages (‘self-wish-images’), using basic art-history principles: composition, content, context, and connotation (Mannay, 2016).

The next four sections will present the results, first focusing on the practitioners’ perspectives of the women’s needs for support, then moving on to the women’s’ experiences, and demonstrating different ways in which contextually sensitive and community-based career interventions can support and facilitate inclusion.

## Professionals as gatekeepers for career interventions

The author conducted several short, semi-structured interviews with NGO-staff, who were employed as social workers, health care professionals or teachers. These practitioners took two main approaches to their work. The first approach was as an expert,

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providing information and medication, who viewed women as traumatised victims in need of protection. The second approach was as an idealist, providing compassion and provision, who viewed women as hurt fellow human beings with basic needs. Neither type considered career support an important part of their services.

The author was denied access to the survivors. The professionals argued that the women were too vulnerable, and that career counselling was not appropriate.

Your research is very important, but ... these people are too fragile to share their traumatic stories. They need professional care, the last thing they need is career counselling!

After several months of unsuccessful recruitment, the author was approached by NN, representing an NGO involved in interventions for (former) sex-workers and survivors of modern slavery. She asked, 'What's in it for them?' The author was invited to a group meeting, but not allowed to interview. NN instructed 'you must stay in the back of the room, observe and wait until they approach you'.

The author experienced an ethical dilemma: should she accept (risking that the women would neither approach nor give consent to further research) or reject (risking failed recruitment and the need to study a different group)? Could career counselling elements be implemented without compromising her research? Agreement on NN's terms would provide a unique opportunity to meet these women. Acknowledging and responding to their needs could be considered ethically sound. Hence, the author chose a different, more vulnerable role and changed the research design. The interviews (renamed 'career conversations') were postponed and replaced with (non-) participant observations and the offer of a creative group-workshop.

## Reaching out to people considered vulnerable

Weekly group-meetings were held in an old building, situated in a 'dodgy' part of town, where substance



**Figure 1. A 'dodgy' part of town**  
(*photograph taken by the author*)

abusers, sex workers and others living on the margins, would mingle during the night. In order to enter, one would have to cross a scarcely lit, public archway, decorated with graffiti, bearing the unmistakably smell of bodily fluids, the ground covered with garbage, used needles and condoms. A stark contrast to the interior, which was clean, candlelit, decorated with flowers, art, background music and the smell of fresh coffee. The room (approximately 30 square meters) had a kitchen corner, a bathroom (with shower), a piano on a stage, and was furnished with small tables and chairs. As only women were allowed in the entrance, the front-door was always guarded.

The author's first encounter with this group evoked strong emotions. Being a single woman, entering an unfamiliar neighborhood, known for criminal activities, on a dark winter's night, she felt vulnerable and powerless. Here, she was not applauded for her academic endeavors or professional skills, but merely tolerated as an alien visitor. At the end of the first meeting, introduced by NN, she was approached by a woman with aggressive body language: 'What took you so long? We need your help!' Over the weeks, others



followed, sharing their stories or asking for career services.

At most meetings, some would come early (to freshen up or check the latest donation of clothing), others late, but all were welcomed and included. Staff-members took time to relate to each of them. Some women flocked together (speaking the same foreign language) laughing out loud, others sat silently, crouching on a chair in the corner. In the beginning of fieldwork, the author was met with scepticism and women kept their distance. Over time, they seemingly accepted her, as she was frequently hugged and included in 'girl-talk' (about fashion, hairstyles, children or men). The author, instructed to cause no harm to vulnerable people, was surprised by their agency, generosity and resilience. She was invited to join in on other activities and asked to come back and provide career services. As one woman said, 'The NGO helps, they are sweet, and I am grateful, but they can't help me write a CV you know?'

## Engaging in indirect career conversations

The women laughed and gesticulated, but also paused and sighed, obviously struggling to find words. Some conversations were extremely uncomfortable to listen to, partially due to content, mostly due to their body language and the sound of silence, containing emotions too strong for words. The author offered time-out, but the women insisted on sharing. As one described, it is 'so painful, but good to realise how far I've come!' They expressed feelings of shame and loneliness but also gratefulness to staff-members, faith (in Mother Nature, Jesus Christ or God) and hope for the future: 'I can do it! With God, all things are possible!' They described themselves as hurt but resilient, strong, creative and adaptable, making a clear distinction between past, present and future. 'I was lost but now I'm found! I am a survivor!' Whether describing retrospectively or imagining future, they never used career vocabulary, but expressed a need for help to survive and overcome social and structural barriers. 'I need to support my family. How can I start my own business?'

## Finding a common language through a creative workshop

The workshop engaged the women in creating an individual collage each, which would depict her present or future self. During the workshop the women, laughing and cooperating to find useful elements, seemed excited and eager to create.

Oh! I want this, they're cute [cuts out flowers] flowers are nice, the feeling and they are attractive [pastes flowers on paper]. This is perfect for, ooooh, my PERFECT one is this one [finds image she likes particularly well]! I LOVE this! Oh YES, this one is CUTE! [cutting and pasting while humming a song].

In the end some rose and presented their product, explaining their choice of material, cheered on by the others. 'Soooo beautiful! I want you to drive me in that car!'

Most collages showed nature (explained as the preferred environment), artifacts (explained as hobbies) or people (differing in color, age, gender and body shape) in pairs or engaged in group activities (explained as the need to be loved and belong).



**Figure 2. Collage produced by a participant** (photograph taken by the author)

This collage (figure 2) in hues of pink, black and white, containing text (lifestyle, perfect home, future, glamour) and images (flowers, white interior, one black car and three white women, facing different ways), was presented by a black woman. She described it as follows:

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I love beautiful cars. I dream of owning my own. I don't have money to buy one, but in the future, I hope. This is the dreamhouse, I love the style! It is clean, neat and a comfortable place to live. The women are beautiful, and I am beautiful also! [holding up her collage, obviously content] So cool! I want the future to be like this!

Her collage and presentation are a stark contrast to her past, growing up in poverty.

Afterwards, several women admitted they were surprised by their own and others' collages. The workshop seemed to provide a new language to express emotions too large for words, build relationships, enable career conversations and provide a sense of community-building.

### Situating careers and lives in context

The women, differing in skin color, age, gender, body shape and country of origin, had similar experiences with oppression, abuse and poverty. They grew up in precarious situations, at risk of exploitation and long-term marginalisation. One was sent away, age six, to work for others. 'It was a really difficult life. I needed to have my mother, but she could not take responsibility for all of us, I had to move out'. Another, evicted by religious parents for being a pregnant teenager, took random jobs to survive. 'I was 14, I wanted to become a nurse, but had to quit school and work'. Several women attended school and aspired, but could not afford, to study. Only one woman remembers a school counselor, encouraging her not to drop out, but she felt the need to work in order to survive. 'So, the money stopped all. I didn't have any hope again to go to school'.

These women longed to be loved and belong. They aspired, hoped and dreamt, but lured by fake scholarships, promises of work or marriage, ended up as sex workers in Europe. 'She broke her promises! Before I came, she said something different and when I came, this wasn't our agreement! We had fights and quarrels many times.'

Neither sex work nor slavery were career choices. They were exploited, subjected to horrific cruelty,

robbed of their freedom, forced to labor and denied basic human rights. Their stories show how career and life develop simultaneously. Neither can be planned in detail as both are shaped by responses to societal and structural barriers. Some elements influenced career development as expected (personal conditions, ambitions, self-efficacy and time), others more than expected (culture and context). Two unforeseen elements (the emotional and spiritual dimension) appeared to be determinants, and two major themes were: the power of words and relationships.

### Conclusions and implications for practice

The results of this study indicate a discrepancy in the women's expressed needs and the practitioners' assumptions of the women's needs. In addition, they differ in opinions on the women's identity, role and career readiness. Furthermore, results indicate that the NGO's interventions meet the women's need for compassion, medication and provision, but fail to meet their need for career services.

The author was surprised by the absence of career practitioners, the lack of inter-professional cooperation in interventions, the impact of the emotional and spiritual dimensions, and the resilience and agency of the women considered vulnerable.

The women, sheltered, safe, and supervised, longed to make their own (career-) choices, but were, to a large degree, underestimated and hindered from doing so. Staff showed genuine interest and concern but left them with little or no control. Access to career support was withheld, based on the assumption that they did not need it and that it would be irrelevant. These assumptions were problematic and condescending, as these women, survivors, caretakers and role-models, had valuable (vocational and life-) skills and were eager to participate and contribute, but needed help to overcome structural and societal barriers. Professionals making assumptions about people's needs are in danger of cementing victim-roles and dysfunctional narratives.

Professional interventions should be knowledge-based and respectful. This study suggests career interventions

can be used to support the inclusion of these women or other marginalised people. Central to this is providing access to different forms of career support and not making assumptions on behalf of the people involved.

Professionals working with marginalised people need to co-create complimentary career interventions and involve their target group. Recent research shows a minor increase in user-involvement, but survivors of modern slavery are seldom included, despite their unique insight in the need for preventive or rehabilitative interventions (Arnegaard & Davis, 2019). Such interventions could include a range of activities and career conversations woven into the daily life activities of the target group. This would require professionals to leave their comfort zone and take time to reach out, relate and listen responsively to marginalised people in their habitat, instead of assuming their needs and offering career services at fixed locations during office hours.

This relational, attentive listening (Gilligan et al., 2003) relates to the philosophical ethics of 'the humanism of the Other' which, according to Levinas (2003) surpasses charity, as we only can understand our own humanity through the humanity of others. 'No one can stay in himself; The humanity of man, subjectivity, is a responsibility for others, an extreme vulnerability' (Levinas 2003, p.67). 'The other's material needs are my spiritual needs' (2003, p.xxxiv). According to him, we need to relate, respond and care for each-Other, as this will give purpose and make us human. In meeting the Other we face ourselves, realising we too are the Other. Based on this and the author's fieldnotes, confirming humanising can be time-consuming and uncomfortable, practical guidelines of C.A.R.E. were developed to facilitate inclusion:

**C**onnect. Be vulnerable. Leave your comfort zone and meet 'the Other' where (s)he is.

**A**cknowledge you too are 'the Other'. All human beings have equal rights and basic needs.

**R**espect. Be humble. Recognize your incompetence and need for 'the Other's' expertise.

**E**ngage. You are interconnected with 'the Other'. Listen and co-create inclusive communities.

Every human being has purpose and potential to participate and contribute. One should not underestimate the value of personal encounters where people are seen, heard and respected for who they are, not for what they do or have. Creative or meditative activities (Hansen & Amundson, 2009), resonating with people's emotional and spiritual dimension, may help express phenomena too large for words, and help someone regard oneself and others as unique and equal. Unfortunately, many minorities and oppressed groups face societal and structural barriers. Despite their valuable skills (needed in, but not always certified by society) they are at risk of exploitation, long-term social marginalisation and a life in poverty.

Poverty and social injustice are complex phenomena, rooted in cultural and political structures, and need to be addressed on all levels. On micro-level, career practitioners have a unique opportunity to promote equity, respect and justice for all, and to help individuals overcome societal and structural barriers. Indeed, career interventions can facilitate inclusion provided practitioners take time, to listen and C.A.R.E., to acknowledge the impact of the emotional and spiritual dimensions, criticise oppressive discourse, customise communication and career services, and engage in inter-professional cooperation to co-create inclusive communities for all.



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