A career guidance for social justice must include many voices

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Abstract

This article discusses the need to make the understanding of social justice in career guidance a collective task for professional communities. The article explores various understandings of social justice in career guidance and how these have been translated into frameworks for practice. Drawing on the theory of communities of practice, the article argues that a professional understanding of social justice could be developed through professional communities of practice with the aim of promoting a pluralism of understandings, not an ultimate consensus. Finally, the article presents a proposed model for such work.

Keywords: Social justice; reflective practice; professional practice; community of practice; equality.

Introduction and method

The concept of social justice is complex. It is a notion that is often used by different groups and individuals, so there are many ideas about what constitutes social justice (Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2018).

It is a concept that often appears as a statement of intent – we want to increase social justice in education, in schools, in the workplace, in society - without it becoming clear what is meant by social justice, how it should be concretely approached, and what

consequences it can have. A career guidance for (increased) social justice is thus no less complex, for what does career guidance for social justice actually mean, beyond its slogan value? Moreover, how should it be approached? And by whom? There already exists a large body of literature on career guidance and social justice, however, this article looks specifically at the importance of a collaborative approach.

In this conceptual article, I will discuss some challenges related to the concept of social justice, when the concept is to find a place in the practice of career guidance. Furthermore, I will provide some suggestions on how to think about social justice from the perspective of professional communities.

I begin the article by discussing different understandings of social justice in career guidance, derived from Sultana (2014) and Watts (2015). I move on to consider how these understandings of social justice in career guidance has been developed into frameworks for career guidance practice by Hooley (2015) and Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen (2019). I argue that these frameworks, however excellent they are, risk being a vehicle for an individualisation of the understanding of social justice, rather than a vehicle for professional discussion. I introduce the principles of community of practice theory (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023) as a way of counterbalancing the latent risk of individualisation in social justice work. Finally, I outline what a concrete model for working with social justice could look like.

Theories of social justice in career guidance

Sultana (2014) points to four (competing) philosophical traditions in the understanding of social justice, ranging from the desire for social harmony, equality, fairness, and (recognition of) differences. This includes both social justice focusing on the good of society, on self-interest of the individual, on just distribution, and on recognition of differences. In a more classical ideological perspective, one could, according to Watts (2015), speak of social justice as dependent on the socio-political ideology of the career counsellor: conservative and concerned with social adaptation; liberal and concerned with non-interference; progressive and concerned with individual change; radical and concerned with social change.

In other words, the content of social justice is not predetermined, and a conservative or liberal approach to guidance also includes a concept of social justice – it is just a different understanding than, for example, a radical approach. That means in order for career guidance for social justice to appear coherent, it must clarify which ideological positions or philosophical traditions it draws upon. One could say that any discussion about promoting social justice in guidance must begin with a clarification of values: what kind of justice?

Sultana (2014) encourages the career counsellor to take a stance, to find their position through conversations with philosophical and ideological traditions, and through experiences from their own practice and life. He does so himself by insisting that career guidance can make a difference and should work towards creating more equality and challenging 'social class destinies' - what we in Denmark often call negative social inheritance (Sultana 2014, p. 322).

Watts also takes a stance and points out that because career guidance is fundamentally a political process that deals with the distribution of life chances, and because life chances are unequally distributed in society, guidance must decide 'whether it serves to reinforce such inequalities or to reduce them' (Watts 2015, p. 171).

Sultana and Watts position themselves in a classical critical theoretical stance, where the purpose of knowledge, science, and professions is to help individuals achieve emancipation by uncovering oppressive structures and power relations. This is done, among other things, on the basis that all knowledge and action stem from often hidden interests and can never be considered value-neutral. Therefore, engagement and taking a stance become crucial (Held, 1980).

Frameworks for social justice in career guidance

In the same critical tradition as discussed above, Hooley (2015) has developed five areas of learning and associated questions that he proposes as a framework for emancipatory guidance. These are questions that guidance activities should help people think about and that he highlights as central to all education. The five areas of learning and questions are as follows:

1. Explore ourselves and the world we live, learn, and work in: Who am I?

2. Examine how our experiences relate to broader historical, political, and social systems: How does the world work?

3. Develop strategies that allow us to make the most of our current situation individually: How do I fit into the world?

4. Develop strategies that allow us to make the most of our current situation collectively: How can I live together with others?

5. Consider how the current situation and structure can be changed: How can I change the world?

(Hooley, 2015)

According to Hooley, working with these areas of learning and questions is important in guidance work to support the emancipation process of the guided individual(s) (Hooley, 2015).

This is important work, and Hooley points out crucial areas of learning and questions in guidance practice that have an emancipatory aim. It would be quite natural for counsellors who wish to work with social justice to draw inspiration from the five areas of learning and questions in conversations and other guidance activities with individuals and groups.

A key point emphasised by Hooley, which becomes central in this context, is that it is not the career counsellor who has the answers or should provide answers on how emancipation (or social justice) should be understood, but rather the career counsellor can support the counselee in exploring and deciding for themselves.

The perhaps most concrete and well-developed proposal for how guidance can work for social justice, namely Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen's (2019) five signposts for socially just career guidance, align with the same critical theoretical tradition. The five signposts encourage:

1. Building critical awareness by depicting the world as it is (i.e., uncovering interests of knowledge in the current structure of society).

2. Naming oppression (i.e., identifying oppressive structures and power relations).

3. Questioning what is normal (i.e., going beyond what appears as society's natural norms).

4. Encouraging people to work together (i.e., linking individual emancipation to solidarity and dialogue).

5. Addressing different levels (i.e., acting on the assumption that individuals and their challenges are intertwined with a dialectic between the individual and societal structures).

(Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2019; Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2021).

With these five signposts for social justice Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen ask crucial questions about guidance practice. However, in the following, I would like to point out a risk in this approach and propose, if not a solution, at least a suggestion for handling this risk.

The risk of individualising the meaning of social justice in career guidance

How do we ensure that Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen's five signposts for social justice will be seen not as primarily a task and a responsibility for the individual career counsellor, but a responsibility for both organisation and profession?

There is a risk, I will argue, that Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen's five signposts will be perceived and translated as concepts that primarily have a bearing on the relationship between the individual career counsellor and the person seeking guidance. It may be perceived as if it is primarily in the relationship between the career counsellor and the individual seeking career guidance that critical awareness should be built, oppression should be named, questions about what is normal should be raised, etc., with the aim of emancipating the guided individual(s).

If the focus for understanding what social justice in career guidance can be primarily lies with the individual counsellors and their respective engagement with social justice, the risk is that the understanding of social justice in career guidance becomes (too) closely tied to the career counsellors' own private stance on the concept. Thus, the necessity of reflecting on a broader value basis than one's own and the potential of letting in other voices in the discussion of social justice become underemphasised.

This has the potential consequence that as an individual counsellor in the realm of social justice, one may overlook the boundary between one's own goals and values, the goals

and values of the counselee, and the goals and values that typically characterise the organisation of which one is a part.

The risk is what I would call the individualisation of social justice. An individualisation that risks understanding social justice in career guidance as (primarily) the personal struggle of the individual career counsellor in her own office. And more concerning, it risks the individual career counsellor mistaking the values underlying their stance on social justice for morality, moral truth, and therefore considering disagreement and conflicting values regarding social justice not merely as a difference of opinion, but as something that calls for moral judgment. The other person who does not subscribe to the same set of values, the same ideological understanding of the "right" social justice, either must suffer from false consciousness or be a bad person.

It can be fine to act individually in response to injustice. Maybe the individual career counsellor is indeed right in her understanding of social justice in the concrete situation. However, when it comes to basing professional practice primarily on one's own individual values and ideological positions, I would like to encourage moderation. This may come into play if, instead of looking at the individual career counsellor as an agent for social justice, we view career guidance as a community of practice. By moderation, I mean a humility towards one's own values and ideological starting point for understanding social justice. Also, a willingness to involve, listen to, and acknowledge that others may have different starting points, that they have the right to have them, and that it holds value for us to try to understand each other. This points to the potential for a career guidance for social justice to be anchored and developed in a professional community.

The aim is not to achieve complete agreement on how social justice should be understood, or how socially just career guidance should be practiced. Such agreement is neither realistic nor desirable. However, the goal is to allow space for different voices, different perspectives, and different considerations to be acknowledged and made visible to the involved professionals.

In that sense, I believe it can be meaningful to start from the last two of Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen's five signposts, namely encouraging people to work together and addressing different levels. And include the last two of Hooley's areas of learning and questions mentioned above, namely, encouraging people to work together and consider if and how they want to change structures and the current situation – all of them with a slight twist. I would urge that we not only see these points in relation to the person seeking guidance – as something the career counsellor should encourage and support for the guided individual – but as a starting point for the career counsellor's own professional work with social justice within a community of other professionals.

Communities of practice as drivers for learning and practice development

In my understanding of professional communities, I draw on Wenger (1998) and Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023) and their definition of communities of practice. The professional community can be one version (but not the only one) of a community of practice.

Here, a group of professionals with a common domain of interest join together. They engage in activities around this domain of interest, they build relationships, listen to and learn from each other. In doing so, they develop a shared practice, qualifying it and using the shared understanding to develop approaches, techniques, and coping-strategies. (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023).

> 'The domain provides a common focus, both for members and for external stakeholders; community builds relationships that enable mutual engagement and collective learning; and practice anchors the learning in what people do, both as a source of lived challenges and as a place to try new things' (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p. 13).

Thus, in a community of practice, it is the challenges from practice (for instance how to develop a career guidance for social justice) that is the driver for the common learning. Common learning becomes relevant because it can help change the practice. An important point is that a shared understanding does not necessarily mean complete agreement; rather, it means a willingness to listen and learn from others' perspectives.

Communities of practice can take on many different forms. They can be very broad or very narrow in their focus. They can be based on a specific profession or they can encompass many different perspectives. According to Wenger-Trayner et al., communities of practice are structured by three fundamental elements: domain, community, and practice. These three elements provide a focus for the community by helping to address three basic questions: What is the community about? (domain). Who should be at the table? (community). What should members do together? (practice) (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023).

Communities of practice can be established as part of an organisation, between organisations, on a purely voluntary basis, or within civil society. The key factor is 'the active participation of members, who find value in the activities of the community' (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p. 65). The driving force behind establishing a community of practice is the desire to learn together and learn from each other in order to address the challenges encountered in one's practice. The starting point for establishing a community of practice is therefore development and participation. Wenger-Trayner et al. describe it in this way: 'You don't design a community on your own and then invite people into your design. You work with members to design it as you go, together, as a way to take the next step. The idea is to design a little, experiment some, do a lot. And repeat' (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023, p. 65).

Communities of practice understood as communities of professionals with a joint interest in developing a career guidance for social justice can also be seen as social justice arenas in their own right. An example of a community of practice could be the research circle, where researches and practitioners meet in a formalised setting to explore and produce knowledge in a reciprocal relationship (Persson, 2009).

Poulsen, Skovhus & Thomsen (2018) point to the potential of the research circle, which shares the features of the community of practice, i.e. a common focus, participant driven engagement and learning and trial in practice, for being both an arena for social justice and

an arena of social justice (Poulsen, Skovhus & Thomsen, 2018). An arena for social justice in the sense that the work in a research circle can 'inspire and develop initiatives and projects that promote social justice in practice' (Poulsen, Skovhus & Thomsen, 2018, p. 221). And an arena of social justice in the sense that 'they aspire to be socially just in their structure, because of the reciprocal exchange' between the participants, creating a higher degree of solidarity and understanding (p. 221).

Poulsen & Buland (2020) also point to the potentials of (professional) communities in professional learning and development. We argue that 'it is precisely the community, the reflections, challenges and co-research of the other participants in the circle that contribute to learning and changes in practice' (Poulsen & Buland, 2020, p. 227).

Thus, a community of practice, whether it is a research circle or another form of organisation, offers a range of experiences that can be valuable in the guidance professional's work of translating social justice into practice. There is potential to reduce the experience of isolation, to build trust and confidence in addressing social justice in one's own practice, and to explore and develop different practices.

In the following section I would like to propose a model for the work of understanding what guidance for social justice can be, built upon the ideas of a community of practice of career counsellors and taking its starting point in the last two of Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen's five signposts and the last two of Hooley's (2015) areas for learning as mentioned above.

A model for exploring career guidance for social justice in professional communities

As shown in Figure 1, the outer four boxes are four questions of reflection and action that can be beneficial to ask within a professional guidance community to uncover four central points.

Question 1: What are the various notions of value and ideological positions present in our career guidance community regarding the concept of social justice?

Question 2: How can these different positions enrich each other?

Question 3: What would we like to impact based on the community's values?

Question 4: Whom would we like to influence?

In the inner four-part circle are my preliminary suggestions for elements that can be included in reflections in the four phases.
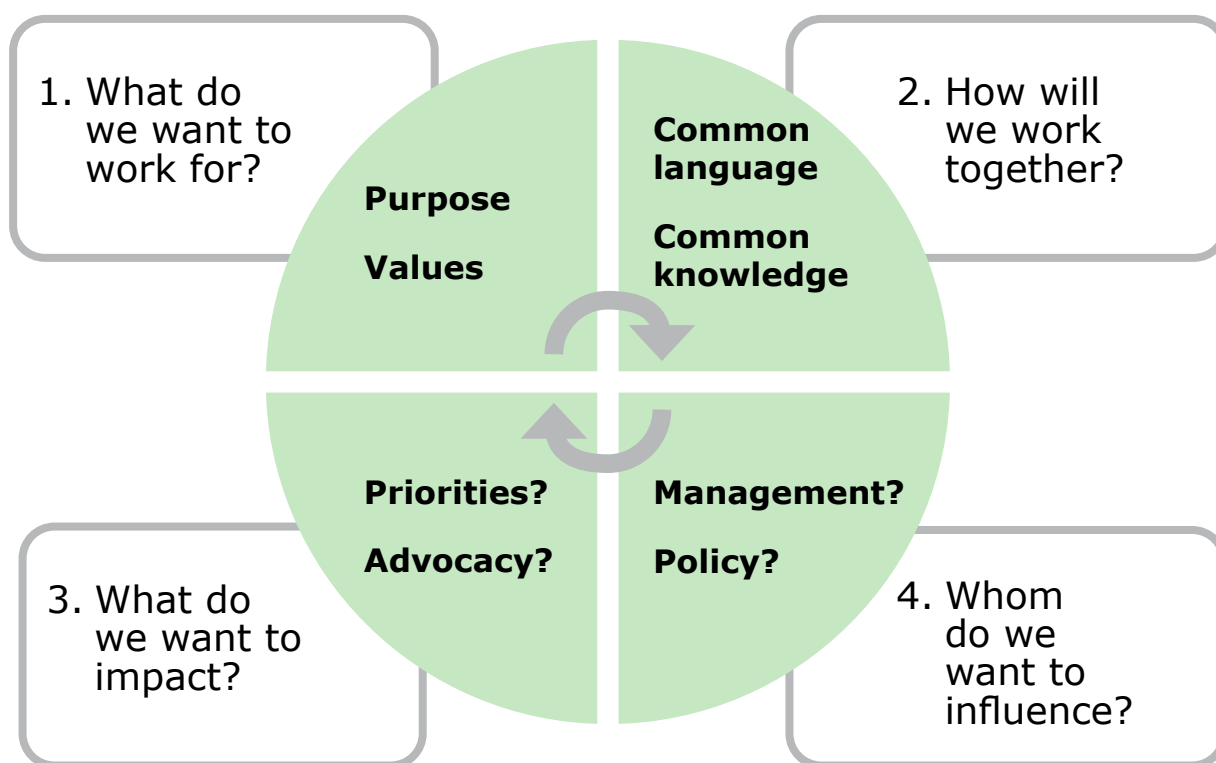
Figure 1. A model for exploring career social justice in professional communities (Bo Klindt Poulsen, July 2023).

In the following, I will briefly comment on the four phases.

Question 1: What do we want to work for?

This is about voicing, clarifying and discussing values in relation to social justice. What understandings of social justice do we each bring in our understanding of the role of career guidance? How and why are they different? Moreover, it is about being aware of the institutional or contextual perspectives on social justice, as they may exist in different mission statements. For example, if one works as a counsellor in secondary school, the secondary school's mission statement could be a co-constructor of the question about social justice. If one works in adult guidance, there may be reflections to be found in the EU's resolution on lifelong guidance. The key is to confront one's own value starting point with others', so that one can handle, accommodate, and listen to disagreement and understand that the notion of social justice is not unambiguous

Question 2: How will we work together?

This is about building a shared knowledge regarding social justice - based on the exploration in question 1. On what can we agree? On what do we disagree? What should we be curious about together? What should we investigate/read/discuss together to gain more insight? How can we support each other in the work of social justice in guidance?

Question 3: What do we want to impact?

Here, it is about considering what we can collectively work to influence, leveraging the strength of the community. It could be about priorities within our career guidance organisation. What is perceived as important and what is seen as less important? How are the counselees and the career guidance and the counsellor evaluated, and does it hinder or promote the forms of social justice we want to support? Could we for instance ask different questions of evaluation?

Question 4: Whom do we want to influence?

This is about exploring who (outside the professional community) can help us address the issues related to social justice that we want to influence. Is it management, and if so, at which levels? How should we discuss this with them? Is it partners/colleagues within the same organisation but in different roles? Is it partners/colleagues in other organisations? How do we engage in conversations with them about this?

I do not see this model as an alternative to Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen's five signposts (or Hooley's five areas of learning) but as a supplement that, based on their ideas, highlights the potential of approaching the development of social justice in career guidance from a collective perspective within professional communities.

The key point of this model is that the criterion for success is not agreement or consensus, neither in terms of understanding what social justice can be nor how it should be practiced. Instead, it is about allowing space for many different voices, so the development of socially just guidance can occur on a polyphonic basis. It is important, as Mouffe points out in her insistence on pluralism and agonism as the basis for a more democratic society, to 'make room for dissent and for the institutions through which it can be manifested' (Mouffe, 2004, p. 47). The aim of the community of practice is to engage in learning and development together, however, it is also central for this process that the community of practice has 'a vibrant public sphere where many conflicting views can be expressed and where there is the possibility to choose among legitimate alternative projects' (Mouffe, 2004, p. 42).

Conclusion

The model presented above is an attempt to shift the focus from the individual counsellor's relationship with and valuation of social justice to a collectively oriented perspective on social justice. It aims to transform diversity in the understanding of social justice in career guidance into a strength. It seeks to include a multitude of voices in the qualification of what social justice can be both conceptually and as concrete practice.

As mentioned above, I see the individualisation of the understanding of social justice as a risk, a risk that can involve a confusion of values with morality and a rejection of other diverging views on social justice as either false consciousness to be dismantled or morally reprehensible. I do not believe that this model can completely prevent this - particularly if the professional communities in question have a very high degree of ideological agreement or homogeneity of values - and it is a risk that I do not address here.

Neither do I address the potential and obvious challenges to working with a model like this in professional communities of practice such as lack of time, commitment, or organisational support. It would be interesting to transform this conceptual model to a concrete, action-research based study, where professionals from different arenas of career guidance – for instance career counsellors, career guidance researchers, managers, etc. – could join in a conversation and development of a career guidance for social justice.

However, I believe that reflecting on hearing and accepting other perspectives and reflecting on social justice as a collective project can counteract a professional individualisation of social justice in guidance, harvest other potentials through dialogue and exchange and professionally strengthen the legitimisation of working for social justice in career guidance.

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