

Reflections on ethical challenges in green guidance

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Abstract

This article explores the ethical challenges of incorporating 'green guidance' into career counselling. Green guidance was a concept introduced by Peter Plant in 1996 and advocates for the integration of environmental justice and sustainability into career decision-making. This article discusses diverse perspectives on the ethical implications, particularly the balance between impartiality and socio-political responsibilities. Despite some concerns about neutrality, the article argues that career guidance should evolve to prioritise environmental sustainability and client well-being. Practical approaches for integrating green issues into career counselling are suggested, drawing on insights from the 'Exploring Green Guidance' project in Europe. The article concludes that addressing climate change in career guidance is an ethical and practical necessity for future career development.

Key words: green guidance; sustainability; ethical challenges; impartiality; client well-being

Introduction

A profound transformation of our economy is essential if humanity wants to achieve the goals set in the Paris Agreement and mitigate catastrophic consequences of human-induced climate change (United Nations, n.d.). The 'green guidance' movement reflects this reality

and examines how career guidance can address and contribute to mitigating the impacts of climate change. The 'green guidance' approach seeks to develop new practices that promote environmental justice (Plant, 1996). It aims to raise individuals' awareness of the environmental impacts of their professional choices while encouraging practitioners to help clients to make career decisions that contribute to environmental preservation. In this context, career success should be reimagined as incorporating environmental and social considerations alongside economic factors. Green guidance challenges the current growth- and market-focused, and largely Western individualistic, bias in theory and practice and is closely connected to the issue of social justice (Plant, 2020). Since the 1990s there has been a growing body of literature linked to green guidance (for a comprehensive review see Bakke et al., 2024) and the topic has attracted the interest of international organisations such as the OECD (Chang & Mann, 2024).

The scientific evidence demonstrates that climate change is the biggest threat modern humans have ever faced (IPCC, 2022). Climate change is already significantly impacting people's careers. According to a recent international survey among practitioners, 76% agree that helping clients to achieve more environmentally sustainable work and lifestyles should be an objective of career guidance and only 13% raise ethical challenges as a significant obstacle for integrating green guidance into their practice (Hooley et al., 2024). Despite this, objections are sometimes raised when discussing how career guidance practitioners should address the green transition, particularly in relation to the ethical imperative of impartiality.

This article aims to discuss different approaches on the ethical issues related to green guidance, providing some arguments in favour of proactively opening questions of sustainability and green transition with clients. We are drawing from outputs collected by the European *Exploring Green Guidance* project (see www.green-guidance.eu), particularly from a rapid literature review and a survey of the direct experiences of practitioners involved in the project. We are both directly involved in the *Exploring Green Guidance* project which is funded by the European Union and which has stimulated our thinking on this subject. This text is not a scientific article, but a reflection based on our experience which aims to provide some stimulus for further discussion. The examples we use do not reflect the full range of literature that exists on the topic. We selected those that we found thought-provoking both for the context of our project and for the readers of this article.

Different approaches to ethical issues in current literature

There are several points of view on the ethical principles that should be adopted by career guidance professionals. Several authors point out the necessity of such practitioners adopting a *socio-political commitment* and making use of the tools of critical psychology to question the role of research and practice in maintaining oppression and social injustices (Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali, 2016). They call for an immediate commitment to resolving multidimensional crises (Guichard, 2016) and invite researchers and practitioners to become political actors to promote social justice and sustainable development and 'think more deeply about whose interests we serve, what it is we should be seeking to achieve for the individual and society, and what contribution we can make in relation to a "green" justice future, and present' (Roe, 2020), thus questioning the dominant mechanisms within society (Carosin & Canzittu, 2021). Guichard (2016) suggests we fundamentally rethink the role of guidance practice by asking a rhetorical question: *Will we continue to collaborate in*

supporting the forms of work that undermine the future of the planet? Or can we promote the creation of active life forms that lead to sustainable development by decent human activities? Such critical thinking suggests that career guidance practitioners should shift their focus from merely facilitating individuals' integration into the existing world, towards actively contributing to its transformation.

Some authors propose a *change of paradigm* for career guidance (Plant, 2020) and suggest fundamentally rethinking guidance practice to ensure its full participation in the development of social justice and climate transition, as well as in educating individuals about climate change. This involves analysing the extent to which individuals' vocational behaviour impacts collective well-being and encouraging clients to consider the consequences of their choices on others and the world, 'even if it means sacrificing the neutrality and impartiality of the guidance process' (Masdonati & Rossier, 2021, p.280). These perspectives emphasise the importance of discussing both individual and collective well-being in career decision-making (Pouyaud & Cohen-Scali, 2016).

Some argue that the fact that guidance professionals introduce the question of 'the needs of the world' in their dialogue with clients, *does not significantly alter the underlying paradigm*. Instead, it merely adds another topic for discussion alongside interests, values, competencies, and other decision-making factors (Rochat, 2021). Transitioning towards green guidance thus entails an ethical commitment to consistently consider these aspects in client interactions, without necessitating a fundamental overhaul of their skills and practice. Rochat argues that, in light of the pressing climatic and social challenges, it is imperative to systematically integrate ecological and human considerations into career guidance processes.

An alternative approach to the issue considers the green transition as an integral aspect of professional life (Hooley, 2022); 'an increasing number of clients are likely to proactively raise concerns about the environment', requiring guidance practitioners to address these concerns and proactively introduce the ecological transition 'as a key contextual issue that is shaping career development'. This perspective posits that considering the ecological transition in career choices extends beyond selecting 'green jobs' and recognises that 'all professions have an environmental impact' and that 'organisations of all types are under pressure for change'. Consequently, guidance practitioners are encouraged to view the ecological transition as permeating the entire professional sphere. Their mission includes guiding individuals through a societal transformation that significantly impacts professional lives and working environments.

Ethical challenges for green practice

As we've already mentioned, some practitioners view climate change and sustainability as politically engaged topics and therefore unacceptable for ethical guidance practice. The requirement for impartiality is relevant. As Hooley (2023) points out, there is often a more or less explicit practical and ideological bias that stems from the organisation practitioners work for, their sources of funding and the objectives of the service they provide. Impartiality is important when a career guidance practitioner must define him or herself against policies promoting certain types of education or professions which may, for example, seek to address current labour shortages in certain sectors. But if career

guidance practitioners are to remain credible, they cannot simply promote government priorities regardless of the interests of the individual. Impartiality also ensures that the practitioner will respect the client's beliefs and convictions about what the best career path is for them. This is especially important in a multicultural environment where people have different life patterns and expectations.

Achieving absolute impartiality in guidance practice is not always possible or even desirable. Some guidance practice does not seek to be impartial, for example practitioners are happy to discuss and advocate against gender segregation of the labour market, educate clients about the gender pay gap, and help those who are being discriminated against. We also recognise ethical tensions within individual (or group) counselling and coaching between impartiality and the requirement to act in the best interests of the client, which is a common element of many codes of ethics (CDI, 2018, NCDA, 2015, CDANZ, 2021).

It is in the clients' best interest to have up-to-date information on the labour market and to know what the future trends are. They can thus better prepare themselves for the changes that await them at a workplace (whether due to automation, environmental changes or any other factors). They can develop competences that will be needed in the future to gain and maintain decent employment. It costs time and money to acquire necessary qualifications and gain appropriate experience, which is why such information is vital for clients in making decisions about their future career paths.

There is a vast number of studies and publications on the future of the labour market and which set out forecasts of what jobs will be available in the next 5 or 10 years (CERIC, 2023; Dickerson et al., 2023; Tytler et al., 2019; World Economic Forum, 2023;). Many of these forecasts highlight environmental change and the need for substantial shifts in the labour market to address climate change. It is one of the duties of the career guidance practitioner to provide information drawing on these; to actively obtain them and to educate themselves in this area (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2021).

The growing green sector and the job opportunities associated with it are an integral part of the LMI that a career practitioner should provide. Bal (2023) states,

It is not always easy to anticipate the skills demand of rapidly growing or new technological areas. A current example is the green and sustainability industry. As technology develops and new tech is introduced, demands for skills can suddenly change very rapidly... But with the green industry of the future, we know we will need engineers and technology experts, some in fields that are not yet fully developed. This means that some training needs, even in highly technological industries, can be anticipated. (p.15)

The LMI dimension of career guidance is value-neutral and therefore should be theoretically unassailable.

If we think (and act) in relation to a broader context of our work and consider social and social justice aspects, we are again skating on the thin ice of an ethical breach. Addressing systemic inequalities (socioeconomic barriers, racial, ethnic and gender discrimination, etc.) may often require practitioners to engage in advocacy. Yet, advocating for a client's rights or interests might be seen by some as in conflict with the desire to be impartial.

Nevertheless, it is important to bring the topic of social justice into the green guidance debate because climate change is deeply intertwined with global patterns of inequality. The poorest and most vulnerable people bear the brunt of the impacts of climate change yet contribute the least to the crisis (World Bank, 2023, Islam, Winkel, 2017). Although equality and non-discrimination are covered in several codes of ethics (CDI, 2018, AGCAS, n.d.), the topic of social justice (of which equality and non-discrimination are an integral part) is considered by some practitioners to be political and therefore breaking their commitment to impartiality.

The IAEVG Ethical Guidelines (2017) offers us a different perspective.

The counsellor shall continually reflect in his or her practice the humanistic principles that underpin ethical conduct and take into account changing social and political issues that have ethical implications for practice. How should educational and career counselling services ethically respond to the global tension between economic and environmental issues in clients' work lives and workplaces?

A further conflict of ethical principles entails the requirement to have the best interests and welfare of clients and their development in mind (CDANZ, 2021, NCDA, 2015, CDI, 2018). It is in everyone's undeniable best interest to live on a planet where the threat of ecological collapse does not hang over us, where we are not exposed to extreme weather events, where we can breathe healthy air and drink unpolluted water. We all have to do our part and work hard to ensure that our planet does not collapse. One way to do it is to make (appropriate) green career choices.

Ideas for green practice

If, as we argue, the historic attachment to the ill-defined notions of neutrality and impartiality should not discourage practitioners' active engagement with issues of sustainability and climate change in their discussions with clients, the question is how to do it? How can practitioners relate to clients around green issues without eliciting perplexity and resistance? Here are some ideas generated in course of the *Exploring Green Guidance* project about what green career guidance could be:

The current liberal narrative may have reached its limits in putting individual needs, desires and wants at the centre of attention without considering the needs of others, including future generations. One of the ways to explore is to take the *needs of the world as a point of departure of careers services*. Some authors justify this ethical stance by pointing out the difference between 'hedonic' well-being (search for pleasure and avoidance of suffering) and 'eudaimonic' well-being (engagement in activities that are meaningful both psychologically and socially), which entails that individual happiness cannot be achieved at the expense of others, i.e. future generations and environment (Rochat, 2021). Practitioners can help their clients achieve both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being by bringing forward their connection to the world and the inevitable moral imperative of sustainability.

This can be the perspective applied in the guidance process during the contracting phase and can be explored further through various activities, such as the Sustainable Career Card Sort (Rochat & Masdonati, 2019) as part of a wider discussion about values. Conversations around clients' values are an integral part of the career guidance process and questions

around sustainability can be introduced into these conversations naturally. This can be done without imposing these topics, but opening them in a language that is natural to clients and in a way that is connected to their situation, e.g. What are the problems and challenges of the world that touch you on an emotional level? What problems of the world, society or your community, would you like to contribute to solving? Which values do you want to pass on to young people? What change would you like to bring to this world? What traces do you want to leave behind on this planet? Which companies, sectors, occupations, businesses or technologies can help you achieve this? Where can you find them? Often using neutral language and words like sustainability, nature, animals, plants, earth, planet can be more useful than using words like 'ecology', 'climate change' and so on, as these have become politically loaded for some people.

The conversation should focus on how clients see the world, how their work can affect the environment in the future. The outcome of such practice will not be that all the clients get a green job or engage in education or training in an area directly linked to green transition, although these options can be proactively proposed and explored. Clients can be helped in exploring how their current work can become 'greener' (for example, 'You work in a factory, what can you specifically do there to make it greener?'). Inviting clients to talk more about their concerns related to the economic transformation can also be a way of better understanding what this issue means for them and propose follow-up questions, identify their drivers, and their expectations to better connect with them.

Another very practical option is to introduce sustainability as one of the choice criteria when choosing a career, education or training opportunity, employment or company using different tools such as cards, tables of decision making, list of criteria and prioritisation.

Conclusion

Climate change is a scientific fact, and saving our planet is not a matter of politics, but of survival. It is therefore in everyone's best interest to help avert an environmental and related humanitarian catastrophe. Both on a personal level (e.g. in trying to consume sustainably) and a professional level (e.g. in seeking green jobs and trying to green your existing job or career).

Career practitioners have an important role to play in this process, as they can show their clients the way towards sustainable employment at the professional level. Unfortunately, climate change is a highly politicised issue and thus presents career practitioners with a false dilemma through the ethical requirement for neutrality. However, we would argue that the survival of humanity is neither right nor left wing.

If facts and information about climate change alone cannot change careers practitioners' attitude or alleviate their concerns about unethical behaviour, the very source of these concerns, the codes of ethics, can be used to help them to think these issues through. There are several principles in them that contradict the narrowly conceived principle of neutrality, which we have discussed in this article, notably the commitments to the provision of accurate information, the directive to act in the best interest of the client and the desire to support social justice. If we want to act in accordance with them, we need to integrate the topic of sustainability into our career practice.

We thus find ourselves in the situation of an ethical clash. In theory, all ethical principles are equal. In reality some are seen as being more important than others, depending on the priorities and situation of each practitioner. The clashes between different ethical imperatives mean that it is our professional duty to reflect upon these ethical clashes as we try to resolve them. We have to be perfectly clear about our priorities and be aware of impacts and consequences of our ethical decisions, based upon those priorities. Ultimately, we would argue that neither contemporary career theories nor codes of ethics prohibit us from providing green guidance.

Other issues related to green guidance require further reflection that is outside of the scope of this article. Practitioners and policy makers have to be aware of the risk of green guidance becoming one of the subtle forms of greenwashing. In this regard, the 4-field analysis model of Packer (2019) which distinguishes between radical, progressive, conservative and liberal approaches may be useful for developing the reflexivity of practitioners. Another issue is the link between sustainability (in a larger sense) and social justice, where the gradual model of Masdonati and Rossier (2021) which differentiates between decent work, dignity, sustainable career and ethical imperatives can be useful. But in this article, we stipulate that the ethical imperative of impartiality is not and should not be an obstacle for integrating green guidance into practice.

The debate about the role of guidance professionals and career change should move forward and focus on practical questions of the effective implementation of green guidance into our daily practice. We have outlined some ideas about connecting with clients and opening these issues with them. More research and work is necessary to develop effective tools that help people to address questions of sustainability through their career decision making, explore opportunities for more sustainable forms of life, better manage their engagement in the green transition and deal with the emotional and psychological issues raised by environmental change. Supporting resources are also needed to help practitioners develop a green understanding of the labour market. These resources need to recognise that there are a range of different ways to 'do' green guidance in a variety of delivery contexts. Through this article we hope we have encouraged guidance practitioners to experiment with opening these issues with their clients as an important first step in the journey of 'greening' the careers sector.

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