Critical perspectives on agency and social justice in transitions and career development

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EDITORIAL

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For this special issue of the journal, we asked authors to explore critical perspectives in career guidance research with a focus on social justice, equality, power and emancipation. Approaches that are related to critical theory have developed considerable momentum in the psychological and social sciences in general, and in career guidance research and theory, in recent years. Given this, it is timely that the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* has focused this special issue on critical perspectives as a means of stimulating further discussion of these ideas.

The *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* is one of the most diverse career development journals in terms of the disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approaches that it publishes. It has a long history of featuring articles which draw on critical approaches to career development theory and career guidance going back at least to the 1990s (e.g. Bailey, 1993; Sultana, 1990). However, despite the history of engagement with critical theories in the field, there have been limited attempts to consider what critical theory might offer collectively to the study of career development and practice of career guidance and counselling with the special issue of this journal on poststructuralism and the impact of the work of Foucault (Besley & Edwards, 2005) offering an important exception. In this issue, we begin the process of addressing this more widely by bringing together researchers who are using critical theory and encouraging reflection on its use.

The term 'critical theory' is a contested one, which is variously used to describe German theoretical and philosophical traditions leading to, and proceeding from, the Frankfurt school, as well as a much wider set of theories drawing on Marxism, structuralism and poststructuralism, feminism and postcolonialism and a range of other theoretical traditions (Bohman, 2005; How, 2003). One way of making the distinction between the narrow and broad definition of critical theory is between Critical Theory (capital C, capital T) which is used to describe Frankfurt school approaches and critical theory (lower case c, lower case t) which is used to describe the broader set of theories.

The Frankfurt school, which drew on the ideas of Hegel and Marx to explore culture, modernity and society, began with Horkheimer in the 1930s before variously engaging Fromm, Adorno and Habermas and arguably continuing to include contemporary thinkers like Honneth and Forst (Corradetti, 2012). A recent example from this tradition of particular interest to the field of career guidance and counselling would be Rosa's work on allegation and acceleration (see Rosa & Trejo-Mathys, 2013) which explores how shifts in the tempo of modern social life have led to what he describes as a "shrinking of the present". The Frankfurt school tradition remains influential as a critical approach in sociology, and in research and discussions on social phenomena. However, it is indirectly represented in the body of work presented in this special issue where the authors draw on a much broader swath of critical theory in their exploration of career development and career guidance.

While we are keen to define critical theory more broadly than the Frankfurt school tradition, the term should not be expanded to include all conceptual, philosophical or theoretical work. There are a wide range of theories that are utilised within career studies, such as the famous Big Five career

theories (Leung, 2008), which cannot be described as critical theories. Given this it is important to define the shared features and concerns that comprise critical theory. We argue that the core features of what we regard as critical theory are that it:

- *Creates a radical imaginary*: Critical theory poses a vision of an alternative or better society. It is defined by the normative belief that things can and should be better than they are and a belief that part of the work of theory is to bring about this change.
- *Attends to power*: Critical theory recognises that social relations are not conducted on a level playing field. Different individuals, institutions and actors have different interests and different degrees of power. Social change emerges from the struggles between these different actors and theory should notice, describe and analyse these power imbalances and the struggles and dynamics between difference forms of power.
- *Unmasks ideology*: In modern and postmodern societies there are many things that obscure the operation of society and power. Critical theory is committed to analysing phenomena and systems and clarifying how they work and in whose interest. This is what Freire (1970/2005) described as "conscientization" in his critical pedagogy.
- *Understands individuals to be in a dialectical relationship with context*: While many disciplines focus primarily on individuals or on social systems, critical theory holds both of these in a dialectical relationship. The individual is both formed by and forms the social environment within which they live. This means that the individual and context are inseparable and that approaches to analysis which ignore this dialectical relationship are likely to miss important elements of processes that are social and psychological at the same time.
- *Views human beings as having a bounded but transformative agency*: Critical theory recognises that human beings build their social world and that any social, political or economic formation can be contested and rebuilt. Because of this, human beings have agency that can transform their lives and the social world. However, this agency, as Marx (1852) famously noted, is not exercised "under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past". Therefore, agency is bounded by context and circumstance, with different individuals having different resources to shape their lives and the world around them. But critical theory also notes that when individuals come together into collectives, the potential for transformative agency increases.

Taken together, these five features define what we understand as critical theory. They provide both a framework for analysing career and career guidance and a rationale for undertaking this analysis. Once again we can take inspiration from Marx and his 11th thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it" (1845/2002).

Why career development and career guidance?

Although this issue is focused on critical theory, it addresses theory through the study of two linked concepts: career development and career guidance. It is important to clarify how we understand these concepts and so we present two definitions drawn from the literature.

Firstly, we are interested in the idea of "career" and career development which we understand as follows:

> Career is not a single moment of decision when we choose one job over another. It is deeply woven into the ongoing fabric of our lives. Our careers are conducted continuously, and they develop in social and political contexts that provide contrasting opportunities and limitations. Career is all around us and there is no escape from it, because it describes the coming together of our life, our learning, and our work. Career is important to the lives of individuals across the world and to the societies in which they live. (McCash et al., 2021, pp. 8–9)

Secondly, we are interested in the concept of "career guidance", which we understand as follows:

> Career guidance supports individuals and groups to discover more about work, leisure and learning and to consider their place in the world and plan for their futures. Key to this is developing individual and community capacity to analyse and problematise assumptions and power relations, to network and build solidarity and to create new and shared opportunities. It empowers individuals and groups to struggle within the world as it is and to imagine the world as it could be. Career guidance can take a wide range of forms and draws on diverse theoretical traditions. But at its heart it is a purposeful learning opportunity which supports individuals and groups to consider and reconsider work, leisure and learning in the light of new information and experiences and to take both individual and collective action as a result of this. (Hooley et al., 2018b, p. 20)

As these definitions show, both career development and career guidance are complex concepts which weave together the inner and outer lives of individuals with an awareness of the context and the structures and relations of power that exist in society. Ultimately, they are addressed to questions of what kind of individual and collective agency can really be understood to exist within the prevailing opportunity structures and how can such agency most effectively be exercised?

The complexity of career development means that no single discipline or theory is sufficient to analyse career, with the field of career studies operating as an interdisciplinary field between psychology, sociology and education, but with other disciplines such as pedagogy, organisational studies, labour market economics, philosophy and literature and cultural studies also providing useful perspectives (McCash et al., 2021). The eclectic and interdisciplinary nature of the field, as well as the multi-scalar perspectives that are needed to understand how career operates and is operated by individuals and collectives, lend themselves to the use of forms of critical theory, which address and acknowledge complexity and find ways to make sense of them by drawing on different epistemic traditions.

Career guidance itself is often understood as a practice which is designed to support and develop citizens' agency in terms of their career, their personal development and their possibilities in life. By supporting reflection and the development of self-knowledge, providing information about different career and life options and the tools to make decisions and take actions, guidance and counselling empowers citizens to manage their own life paths, make successful transitions and achieve balance and wellbeing in their personal and professional lives with others. While individual-centred approaches are still dominant in career guidance they often fail to acknowledge structural, contextual and institutional inequalities, thereby also leaving the impact and significance of broader discourses and structural conditions, for instance leaving neoliberal governance, patriarchy, white supremacy, colonial history and heteronormativity unquestioned. The dominance of an individualistic perspective has shaped the possibilities and practices of career guidance and risks perpetuating inequalities and injustices, tacitly privileging certain voices and worldviews, and thereby normalising and legitimising social injustice. As Sultana points out, for career guidance to be able to counter the risk of responsibilisation, this dominance needs to be explored in the intimate relationship between language, thought and action both in the professional practice as well as the public sphere (Sultana, 2022). Sultana concludes by highlighting the responsibility of the wider career guidance profession including scholars and professionals:

> Reclaiming language, investing it with new meanings, exchanging words for others that are more helpful in understanding whose interests are being served, and that alert us to the opportunity of agency and the systemic linkages between the personal and the political … one and all open up possibilities to resist the colonisation of our lifeworld by the values of neoliberalism. (Sultana, 2022, p. 17)

This responsibility to reclaim language resembles what Cunliffe calls reflexive praxis which describes a form of critical reflexivity that calls for a moral imperative to be aware of how the use of words, concepts and theories can support old or new ways of relating and engaging in professional practice (2004). Revisiting the concept of reflexive praxis in 2016, Cunliffe added that:

> … being reflexive is about having 'a heart', it is not a technique but a way of being in relation with others that brings with it moral and ethical considerations. It requires us to be solicitous and respectful of differences. Being reflexive doesn't give us definitive answers to problems but highlights the need to engage in critical questioning and deeper debate around taken-for granted issues that have potential moral and ethical implications: A reflexive debate I believe we should be engaging in as academics, researchers, students, leaders, and managers. (Cunliffe, 2016, p. 745)

In this special issue, we bring together a range of articles which support this quest to reclaim and develop the language of career development and career guidance and foster practices of critical reflexivity within the field.

About the special issue

The issue emerged from a range of connected activities in our field. The Nordic Research Network on Transitions, Career and Guidance (NoRNet) held a conference in October 2019 at Aarhus University in Copenhagen entitled "Critical perspectives on agency and social justice in transitions and career development". This conference stimulated discussion in this area and provided the focal point for the call for papers for this issue. Many of the papers in this issue were first presented at the Copenhagen conference, but more have emerged subsequent to the conference, reflecting the wide interest in this area.

The engagement with critical theory also draws on a range of other recent initiatives that have been viewed as a "turn to social justice" within the field of career guidance. These include the publication of the International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance's "communiqué on social justice in educational and career guidance and counselling" in 2013 (IAEVG, 2013). This was followed by special issues of the *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance* (Frey et al., 2014) and the *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling* (Hooley & Sultana, 2016). The movement continued to deepen with the production of two volumes on social justice in career guidance (Hooley et al., 2018a, 2019) which in turn inspired the Norplus international intensive master course on social justice delivered online by the Inland Norway University of Applied Science, the *Career Guidance and Social Justice* website (https://careerguidancesocialjustice.wordpress.com/) and the 6th European Doctoral school of career guidance and counselling (ECADOC) held in Malta in 2019 under the theme of "Researching career guidance for social justice".

This special issue seeks to draw some of these strands together and provide an opportunity to consider career development and career guidance research through the lens of critical theory. The focus of most of the initiatives described above has been the pursuit of social justice and while many have explored theoretical perspectives, there has been little overt discussion of what this "turn to social justice" means for the future of career theory.

If the journey to this special issue began in earnest in Copenhagen in October 2019, the subsequent three years have seen the paths of our lives, careers and academic networks take extremely circuitous routes. Much of the contemporary interest in social justice in career guidance, and the associated epistemic stances drawn from critical theory, was prompted by the financial crisis of 2008. A period of wage stagnation, populism and austerity created a profoundly different environment for career development and career guidance (Hooley et al., 2018b; Simosi et al., 2015). The turn to social justice and critical theory within the field can be understood in some ways as a reaction to this new environment, albeit one which, as already noted, has roots in thinking within this field which go back decades.

Since 2019 the political economy has continued to shift at an alarming rate. As delegates left the Copenhagen conference, they had little idea that the next three years would include a pandemic, an intensification of the climate crisis, war in Europe, a cost-of-living crisis and massive disruption of global supply chains, with attendant political shifts. This special issue is not an attempt to address what these massive shifts mean to the opportunity structure and to the policy and practice of career guidance. But we hope that the analyses rooted in critical theories and outlined in this special issue provide future scholars with new tools to undertake this task. The development of critical theory and its application to the questions of how we can career in the contemporary world and what forms career guidance might take will hopefully clarify the interaction between the individual and the wider context in ways that support individuals, careers practitioners, policymakers and researchers to think and act differently.

This issue presents 13 articles which utilise critical theory to address issues of career development and career guidance. While each paper addresses a different theme and utilises different theorists and concepts, they are united by their engagement with the core features and concerns that comprise critical theory as well as a thematic concern with career development and career guidance. We have grouped the papers into three theoretical traditions which we describe as: critical psychologies, relational sociologies and postmodern discourse theories.

Critical psychologies

The first category of papers draws on critical psychologies with links to critical theory and the Frankfurt School. Critical psychologies draw on ideas from both Marx and Freud and emphasise "pursuing social justice, promoting the welfare of communities in general and oppressed groups in particular, and transforming the status quo of both society and psychology" (Fox et al., 2009, p. 5). In these theories, the individual's psychology is always situated in a context and studied in relation to the world in which the individual takes part and in which they have wishes, desires and hopes for their lives and careers.

In the first article, Skovhus and Thomsen introduce critical psychology in the German/European tradition. They mainly draw on Holzkamp, Drejer and Højholt to specify concepts and ways of analysing that have significant potential and show how these concepts enable systematic critical analyses of empirical, qualitative data on career guidance. The analysis also draws attention to the practice of career guidance itself and shows how career guidance becomes a condition for students in their process of developing career possibilities, self-understanding and subjective standpoints in life. Skovhus and Thomsen conclude that by utilising a dialectical approach to analyses of personal meanings and subjective reasons in relation with societal conditions with a focus on subjective standpoints and first-person perspectives, we can gain insight into how the world presents itself to the people in whose lives career education and guidance are meant to make a difference.

In the second article, McCrory introduces a critique of Margareth Archer's work on agency as a basis for introducing Anna Stetsenko's (2017) post-Vygotskian "Transformative Activist Stance" as an ontology of persons and social life. This means that agency is to be viewed as not just individual but also ineluctably social and continually directed towards bringing a desired world into being. At the same time, according to McCrory, practitioners as well as researchers need to understand that peoples' agency is not unbounded and that it is important to avoid thinking that peoples' career thinking and actions solely make the world. A fuller consideration of the ethico-political dimensions of agency and career could act as a basis for the development of new models of practice, scholarship and research that address issues of social justice.

In the final article in this category, Casanova, Costa, Lawthom and Coimbra explore and critique psychological discourse through a qualitative analysis of a focus group interview. They engage psychologists in discussing the implications of two quantitative research projects on uncertainty and unemployment and attend to the political nature of this discussion. Focusing on the implications of hegemonic psychological discourse for career counselling, Casanova et al. make use of social-constructivist discourse analysis of the interview data. They argue that a critical standpoint in counselling psychology should consider the moral and ethical implications of psychology and its interventions as previously highlighted by Prilleltensky (1994). Casanova et al. consider this to be particularly important for the role psychologists play in promoting social justice. They discuss how socio-political issues influence practice: for instance, in terms of constructing the employable individual, and also in terms of recognising the limitations of individual psychological approaches and explanations.

Relational sociologies

The second category of articles focuses on the interaction between the individual and structures, and between actors. This focus is central in relational sociology, and while there are many strands within

the field of relational sociology, what unites these are the notions that what constitutes social life is transactions, interactions, social ties and conversations (Tilly 2002), and that society "is relation", rather than a space "containing" relations (Donati 2007). The five articles in this section focus particularly on agency, social justice and career guidance or career development using different perspectives.

In the first article, Bilon and Thomsen draw on Emir-Bayer and Mische's understanding of agency (1998) to develop and test a framework for analysing and discussing the internal structure of agency within career guidance theory. They find the proposed approach constructive in developing a deeper understanding of the strengths and shortcomings in conceptualisation of agency in contemporary career guidance theory. In the second article, Toiviannen argues that because the tradition of career guidance is traditionally psychological, career guidance practices have often adopted highly individualised notions of agency, and that these notions fail to grasp the contextual factors and societal structures from which agency emerges. By repositioning agency as a relational phenomenon, Toiviannen offers an alternative approach to agency exploring agency as emerging in a relational and joint construction. Finally, she elaborates a concept of co-agency to express the embedded, co-constructed and political nature of agency.

Rice, Leary and Klatt focus on how structural, contextual and institutional conditions influence the construction of individual agency in career development policy. Drawing on Sen's notion of the capabilities approach (Sen, 1985), in this article they discuss responsibilisation, described as the process by which responsibility for outcomes is transferred from the state to the individual, through a combination of policy actions and the framing of public discourse. Rice et al. examine the assumptions embedded in current Australian government career guidance websites. They contend that a socially just profession must acknowledge the limits on personal agency, and seek to develop materials and policies that help those on career journeys to realise the limits on individual responsibility. They make the point that while career development can help them navigate the matrix, the power to define the contours of that matrix and the possible pathways within it, often rests in the hands of others.

The next two papers in this theme focus on antiracism. In the fourth article, Souto and Sotkasiira discuss the importance of intersectionality and anti-racism in career guidance and identify practical examples of how to go about dismantling ethnic and racial normativities that shape educational and labour market transitions. The aim is therefore to deepen the understanding of antiracist and intersectional career guidance by presenting the results of a study based on 22 interviews with counsellors working among ethnic and/or racialised minorities. Their study presents examples of critical practices while also underlining the importance of guidance practices that mainstream intersectionality and advocate on behalf of oppressed minorities.

Lastly, Dorter and Damani show that while immigrant employment gaps are typically articulated as skill-deficits of newcomer workers, evidence suggests that structural oppression and intercultural ignorance in labour markets create greater barriers to newcomers' success. Dorter and Damani present findings from a federally-funded, immigrant-centred project in a small Canadian city, that flipped that narrative to confront xenophobia and racism through intercultural intelligence interventions with local employers. By positioning newcomers as mentors or coaches for employers, the project disrupted the typical power relationship, empowering newcomers with a platform and tools to voice their experiences and directly influence the systemic and structural inequity that they face as jobseekers. Their expertise and abilities were validated and reinforced through the project and by employers. Dorter and Damani recommend incorporating similar approaches in existing newcomer employment strategies in order to further the voices and build agency in newcomer jobseekers.

Postmodern discourse theories

The final category of critical theories in this special issue draws on radical poststructuralist theories as well as on post-Marxist traditions. These theories are interested in the role of language in constructing social reality and shaping the possibilities for political change and struggle. They emphasise pluralism and diversity, typically recognising multiple identities, truths and claims to authority but also argue for the potential for solidarity and counter-hegemonic political projects. Boucher (2000) described these theories as "postmodern discourse theory" locating the centre of that terminology in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). However, as Boucher admitted there are many postmodernisms, not all of which would meet our five categories of critical theory, particularly as some reject the idea of a radical imaginary and the possibility of transformative agency. However, the postmodern discourse theories discussed here all adopt a radical, emancipatory stance, even if they also frequently problematise the deployment of normative and totalising concepts.

Bengtson draws on the work of the philosopher Fricker (2007) to explore power inequalities in the guidance process. She relates these issues to Fricker's work on epistemic justice which shows how knowledge is produced and valued, and how what is known and not known become a key dimension in the construction of inequality and the perpetuation of injustice. Bengtson explores how epistemic justice can be related to career guidance interactions which are taking place within wider political and social systems (e.g. the school or the workplace) and in many ways can be viewed as an exchange of different forms of knowledge from which meaning, and therefore, power are constructed.

In a similar way Vahidi, Arnold and Barnard draw on the work of the critical discourse theorist Fairclough (2003) to unmask power and ideology in press representations of the concept of career. Vahidi et al. also draw on Fraser (1990) to attend to questions of distribution, representation and recognition in the representation of career and consider its implications for social justice. In particular they note that working class people are largely excluded from the concept of career within the press discourse and that individual agency is strongly emphasised rather than a recognition of the structural constraints of career.

The recognition that the construction of knowledge and the definition of career is central to the way in which career and career guidance is experienced and the impact that it has on individuals and societies is also found in Reid and Kelestyn's article. Reid and Kelestyn use Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" approach to explore and unmask the use of the concept of employability within higher education. They assert that employability frequently acts as a responsibilising discourse, reinforcing the idea that neoliberalism represents an unalterable reality within which career must be pursued. But, more hopefully, they also find that a design thinking influenced career guidance intervention has the potential for unmasking ideology and encouraging reflexivity.

Cunningham and Christie also focus on the themes of employability and employment in their article. They draw on a different theoretical tradition, using van Mannen's (2014) phenomenology as a theoretical lens. Van Mannen cannot really be thought of as a critical theorist, but the way in which Cunningham and Christie deploy his ideas aligns closely with the way others are using critical discourse analysis to attend to how people construct meaning and exercise power. Cunningham and Christie also argue that phenomenological approaches offer tools which can help career guidance practitioners to attend to the lived experiences of those they are working with and adopt more socially just forms of practice.

Finally, Hooley's article draws key concepts from post-Marxist discourse theorists to undertake a radical re-reading of a career counselling model. Drawing on Laclau's (1996/2007) concept of the "empty signifier", Hooley contends that the way in which concepts like "career", "career guidance" and "social justice" are defined becomes a site for struggle about the meaning and purpose of the field. He then goes on to draw concepts and terminology from Laclau and Mouffe, and Hardt and Negri, to undertake a radical re-reading of Ali and Graham's (1996) counselling approach to career guidance. This process of re-reading and redefinition, and of linking existing concepts and

practices to new chains of signification, provides a way to build a radical imaginary and to develop existing career guidance practices in an emancipatory direction.

Conclusion

In 2018 Weber, together with colleagues from across Europe (Weber et al., 2018), set out an ambitious European research agenda for the field of career studies. They argued that if careers research was going to achieve its potential a much more proactive approach was needed. Careers researchers needed to be assertively inter-disciplinary, engaged with social and contextual change and willing to actively intervene in the world. The European research agenda highlights a wide range of important technical questions around efficacy and implementation of career guidance, but it also emphasises that research is needed on political, ethical, ideological and conceptual questions. In other words, we need to move beyond the questions of "how to career and deliver career guidance effectively" and begin to ask definitional questions about what these activities really mean and moral, political and ethical questions about what they are trying to achieve and why. This special issue makes the case that critical theory is vital for addressing all these questions. Critical theory drives us towards deeper forms of engagement, it encourages multi-scalar and interdisciplinary thinking and expands the possibilities of what research in our field can attempt.

Across the 13 articles, in this issue, we explore critical theory as a way of expanding the possibilities open to career theory, research and practice. Such a collection cannot be exhaustive, it inevitably leaves out many critical theories that could further illustrate and illuminate the careers field. But, neither is it just a random selection of papers drawing on (relatively) unfamiliar approaches within the field. The decision to bring together this special issue hopefully points to a new direction in the development of career theory. Such a new direction does not necessarily need to abandon the main theoretical influences of the past (notably the vocational psychology tradition), but it does need to fuse and enrich them with wider epistemic approaches that are more capable of addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century.

This special issue demonstrates that the broad tradition of critical theory offers much to the careers field. In particular, it shows that the traditions of critical psychology, relational sociology and postmodern discourse theories can be effectively deployed to increase understanding of career development and career guidance and to build new forms of career theory, new forms of knowledge and new forms of relations with research participants. Perhaps most importantly it proposes that the utilisation of critical theory in the field of career studies should be defined by research which seeks to create a radical imaginary, attend to power, unmask ideology, understand individuals to be in a dialectical relationship with context, and view human beings as having a bounded but transformative agency.

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Disclosure statement

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