



On supporting agency in career guidance

How do people develop agency in life? And what is the role of career guidance in developing people's agency? Anna Bilon-Piórko invites to a moment of reflection on these questions and encourages us to form ideas about the role of career counselling in the processes in which individuals develop agency.

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Why is it worthwhile to study individuals' agency in the context of their work lives, their communities, and their cultures? Possibilities of transforming personal lives and making change in social life have been explored by scholars, practitioners, and social activists for centuries. Why do some people reproduce social models and norms, wherein they only adjust to particular social circumstances, while other people strive to transform their socio-cultural realities even in the most adverse conditions?

Such questions tie in with inquiries about human agency and are particularly relevant in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has profoundly altered the world of work. The newly emerging labour market and the novel ways of working generate new contexts in which to achieve one's life goals and develop one's identity. The question of human agency acquires new meanings today. Given this, it is

crucial to consider what social scientists say about agency. Their insights prove particularly relevant if we realise that agency cannot be reduced to the self-perceived “sense of agency” that individuals experience (i.e., the belief that “I can and am able to do anything”). The social context checks this feeling as people always exercise agency vis-à-vis or towards something/somebody, and agency can only be studied in relation to its context.

What is agency and how does it develop?

According to Emirbayer and Mische, agency can be understood as “temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situation”. Based upon their definition, agency is understood in relation to its context in which it occurs, and through an interplay between habit, imagination, and judgement. This means that people, who always inhabit concrete contexts, draw on their past (habit), their notions of and hypotheses about the future (imagination) and their practical skills of event assessment and decision-making (judgment) to act and respond to the challenges of life. Such actions may contribute to change in a people’s lives and in their environments. Agency is thus a process; it is a changeable condition and something that can be learned and developed by people. Agency may vary across various spheres of a person’s life; for example, considerable agency in family life may be combined with limited agency in work life. Thus, agency has many layers and dimensions. Emirbayer and Mische stress that the most important dimensions are related to the past, the present and the future – it is an issue of what people learnt in the past, what motivates them for the future and how they act in the present.

Let us have a closer look at the agency dimensions and ponder how their development may be supported in career counselling. Our starting point is the assumption that agency is central to individuals’ work lives not only because people should adjust to the current conditions of the labour market, but also to foster a new society, to trigger social change and to build a more balanced labour market, we need to go beyond repeated behaviour patterns and the reproduction of the social system. Human agency can be supported in the counselling process, and it is important to realise that this process will be more easily channelled towards this goal if we address a few fundamental issues.

The importance of past experience and habits

The past and habits are extremely important for individuals’ agency as agency is linked to the fact that individuals combine their experiences into schemas. These are indispensable for people to cope with situations that occur in their personal and social lives. In all their actions, individuals selectively reactivate previously mastered ways of thinking and acting, which may happen in a more or less conscious way. Given this, it is crucial how individuals recognise, locate, and implement such schemas

in their daily lives. Important factors include what people have learned in their lives, what habits they have developed, and how flexible they are in applying the acquired schemas in new social situations. On the one hand, if people consistently abide by the same experience schemas, they feel secure in action and in social situations (e.g., fixed modes of conduct vis-à-vis superiors help individuals work in particular settings in conformity with their organisational cultures); on the other hand, such entrenched schemas prevent people from leaving behind situations which disadvantage them.

In a broader perspective, the application of schemas may contribute to the reproduction of social conditions and contexts, which are reinforced by the repetition of the same ways of thinking and action. To support the development of this dimension of agency, guidance may create possibilities for crafting flexible action schemas which help people actively transform local contexts (e.g. lifelong career education supporting pro-active attitudes/the culture of activeness and reflective action). At the same time, the examination of these schemas may help individuals discover both errors in and the useful potential of their actions (e.g. the realisation that the coping mechanisms an individual has been using are efficacious). This dimension is the least recognised one and involves routine actions. As such, it requires observation, discussion, interrogation of certain beliefs and values, etc.

The role of the future

This dimension of human agency is closely related to people's capacity to envisage possible trajectories of events and actions, in which they use the acquired modes of acting and thinking in creative ways and, as a result, found their pursuits on their hopes, fears and desires for the future. The crucial role is played by what narratives of the future people produce, what ways of action they plan, how inventively they use their experiences to construct hypothetical future scenarios, and how they express their readiness to experiment. Of course, in doing all this, people rely on their prior experiences, but they are essentially capable of transforming the symbolic world and social contexts. As can be seen, this context is very frequently explored and developed in career guidance. Developing action scenarios, designing careers, and making occupational decisions mark the moments in which agency is supported and developed. The reinforcement of agency also involves motivating people to act and fostering imaginations and projects which include not only adjustment to the conditions of the labour market but also the active shaping and transformation of these conditions. This entails supporting alternative ways of thinking about self and society, exploring solutions and projecting visions of (not only personal) future.

The significance of "here and now"

Individuals respond to the demands of everyday life, dilemmas, and ambiguous situations by making practical and normative decisions and choices. These choices are often made in ambivalent circumstances including conflicts of values in which people are not always capable of anticipating all

the future consequences of actions they undertake at that moment. People are equipped with the “practical wisdom” of action. Crucial to this dimension of agency is thus the contextualisation of experience, which very often takes place in dialogue with self or others (for example, we ask ourselves what a given situation means; how we assess it, how we can carry on or solve the problem). Individuals thus scrutinise and evaluate their own actions. The goal to achieve is action which reaches beyond the level of habitual, trained action. This is promoted by capacities to problematise situations, to make decisions and to implement them in life. This dimension of agency is nurtured by facilitating clients’ evaluation of action through supporting the processes of assessing situations (what is it that makes this situation different from others?) and finding solutions (therein, making decisions and choices). The capacity for action should be supported by offering opportunities for exercising and rehearsing actions (e.g., job interviews) and reflecting on them.

[Constructing a narrative about action in career guidance](#)

The dimensions of human agency depicted above are interconnected and form a specific structure. Therefore, when we project the future, we rely on our prior experiences and the ways we give the meanings to the world. We tend to see only these possibilities that we have learnt to notice. Nevertheless, learning processes are not only individual, but also collective. Therefore, here we can see the importance of social classes, the impacts of local communities and social and mass-media etc. It’s extremely important for career guidance process to recognize these impacts and meanings given to the world since the client’s world can considerably differ from our own.

Every action may spark a new internal dialogue and occasion the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. We tend to forget the apparently obvious fact that human agency comes from various sources and that people display various agentic orientations throughout their life courses. Their actions are sometimes fuelled by the future (e.g., visions of the future, wishes and desires) and sometimes by the past (e.g., ingrained action patterns or attempts to avoid experiencing a given situation again). It is certainly helpful to find out what actually triggered our clients to act and how they act.

In career guidance, we can explore on how actions taken by clients in their lives were motivated, conducted and what were the results of these actions. This seems to be crucial as agency develops by reflexive action and learning. We can, thus, support clients’ biographical learning by helping them to learn from their past, from their present, and for their future. We simply can help them to learn from their lives and recognize the moments in which their actions were effective which resulted in changes in their lives and local communities. For this we can remember a few assumptions rooted in agency theory and theory of biographical learning:

1. Recognition of clients’ schemas is crucial to help them to identify learning processes from the past.

2. Creating opportunities in the present, as well as the deep analysis of the current situation can help clients to recognize and understand their life-situations. This creates the opportunities for learning agency from the present.

3. Creating the visions of the future, together with creating the narratives and analysis of the possible results of actions can be a great exercise for agency development and learning for (and from) the future.

This calls for launching active counselling focused on the clients' learning by doing. Crucially, constructing a narrative about action and action as such are two different things. Therefore, career guidance focused on agency promotes both, the narrative methods as well as the elements of problem-based learning and role-play methods. It also supports learning in real environments and community contexts.

The importance of social context and structure

The social context in which people live (their social environment) is crucial to supporting the development of their agency. Emirbayer and Mische insist that the social structure (norms, values, the social class system, social resources, etc.) always results from relationships in which people operate. Given this, agency must be considered in the context of settings in which people live. These aspects are particularly important in multicultural and dynamic environments which may include a range of varied social structures. Therefore, making use of this theoretical framework in career guidance, it is crucial to understand, how clients' settings permit the development of agency. Social environments can create both, facilitators as well as obstacles for agency development. By deepening the knowledge on the client's social environment, we can help them to realize whether the norms and values of their settings promote the realisation of their life projects, and what opportunities for development these settings afford to them. Clients can better understand what the social impacts on their lives are, and how to deal with the impacts that are unwanted. Furthermore, focusing on social contexts can allow clients to understand better the global issues inevitably connected with labour market and the importance of historical time that we all experience. This can be a point of departure for noticing how these structures can be re-shaped, and, thought this, agency can be supported.

Conclusion

Career guidance may immensely contribute to supporting human agency. Theories of agency emphasise that the essential factors in this process include the social context, learning processes (though Emirbayer and Mische talk about "practising" agency rather than learning it) and the meta- and macro-perspectives, that is, attention to social dimensions and consequences of actions and the recognition that the development of agency hinges not only on a given local environment but also on

dynamic global processes and policies, as well as on changing historical conjunctures. If career guidance is to support agency, it must analyse these complex, multi-layered contexts. To support the agency of clients (students/adults) means to support their holistic development, with a particular focus on action (to avoid supporting merely “the sense of agency”).

Guest editor Dr. Ingela Bergmo Prvulovic, Ass. Professor in Education at the School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University, Sweden, processes and edits the theoretical texts.

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Biographical learning is life-long and life-wide learning. The theory of biographical learning by Alheit stresses that people learn in each situation and circumstances they experience, and, especially, when they analyze reflexively their own biographies, and create narratives. People’s course of life and their biographies are the sources of knowledge about themselves, and about the world. Biesta and Tedder stress that biographical learning denotes *learning for life* and *learning from life*. Supporting clients’ agency is strongly related to their biographical learning. We enhance learning from the past, learning from the present and learning for (and from) the future. We remember that learning occurs in each action and agency can be a result of the learning processes.

Schemas are the ways of perceiving, reacting, and thinking of reality and events that happen to people. It is the way in which people – not always consciously – interpret the world. These are also corporeal patterns of acting (e.g. ways of communicating with people).