

this and that from Luxembourg on career counselling from Luxembourg

Firstly I would like to thank you for having me here today in Istanbul. And I can tell you that when I first came here in August 2008, I immediately fell in love with the place and this despite the fact that my suitcase had gone to Japan. So on all the photos taken at that time, my wife and I are wearing the same clothes. Rest assured though, we did not turn into smelly monsters, we did wash our clothes every night and as it was summer, they dried very quickly over night.

When preparing this talk, I was wondering what I should actually tell you. I decided then that rather than give you yet more information on issues you know as much about as I do, if not more, or on matters you easily can look up in the relevant scientific literature, I decided to entitle my talk **this and that from Luxembourg on career counselling** and tell you a bit about:

- **who I am and what I do,**
- **where I come from,**
- **something about career counselling in my country,**
- **whether counselling really matters,**
- **what I think a counsellor should NOT do,**
- **the way forward in career counselling, as I see it,** and at the end
- **a personal literary conclusion.**

So,

WHO am I and WHAT do I do ?

I am employed as an educational psychologist and a guidance counsellor by the Luxembourg Ministry of Education, Childhood and Youth. Furthermore, I am the head of the Applied Vocational Psychology and Policy Research Unit, the **AVOPP**.

This unit was founded in 2005 by psychologists, educational scientists, statisticians and economists from Belgium, Canada, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland and Switzerland, with additional members in France and the UK, and is based in Luxembourg.

Here a **few slides from our Website**.

The objectives of the AVOPP are

- the development, the scientific accompaniment and the external evaluation of studies and scientific projects;
- the development and promotion of transnational networks;
- the elaboration and realization of modules and programs of qualification for careers advisers, with certification;
- consultancy work in relation to measures and programs of career development within the framework of human resources; and
- the edition and publication of scientific works.

Let me also emphasize that we collaborate very closely and extensively with the **University of Applied Labour Studies of the Federal Employment Agency in Mannheim**, in Germany.

WHERE do I come from ?

I come from Luxembourg, a small, prosperous nation of just over half a million inhabitants. And I am quite proud telling you that although there are 44% are foreigners permanently living in Luxembourg, we do not have any xenophobic political party as you will find in France or the UK. More recently some cracks have appeared in our close to perfect world and we have had to acknowledge that we may have become too comfortable for our own good. As Luxembourgers we nevertheless still seem to be intent on some day reaching Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" or at least on getting there before anybody else does, even if that might mean to excel in a weird kind of **emotional and intellectual immobility**, possibly best rendered by our national motto: **"Mir wölle bleiwe wat mir sin"** – "We want to remain what we are" which I suggest we should change into "Mir wölle halen wat mir hun" - "We want to keep what we have got"

Fact is that almost three quarters of the Luxembourg nationals work in civil service or related areas whereas the huge majority of resident foreigners and the nearly 160.000 people from France, Belgium and Germany who commute on a daily basis into Luxembourg are confined to the private sector. And if we are prosperous, it is also and above all because of the wealth these people are creating in Luxembourg, wealth that is then however ascribed only to the sole number of people actually living in Luxembourg. As regards unemployment the most recent rate is 7.1% (December 2013) and even if this is still low by comparison to our neighbouring countries, it is unusually high by Luxembourg standards and it is the more worrying as the unemployment rate has more than doubled in the last few years.

What about guidance and counselling in MY COUNTRY ?

Guidance and counselling do exist in Luxembourg as proven in a report by the OECD that evaluated the guidance and counselling set-ups in Luxembourg in 2002. But even without that report there is ample evidence that there are guidance and counselling related activities going on in Luxembourg though they are very heterogeneous. They also used to fall under the administrative authority of three different Ministries i.e. the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, the Ministry of Labour, and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Since the parliamentary elections in October last year however, and under the new government, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research have again been merged under one common denomination i.e. the Ministry of Education, Childhood and Youth, with the Minister's competences now ranging from pre-Kindergarten to Higher Education. Personally, I think that this is a very positive development, as I truly believe that guidance and counselling have to be considered in the long term. If I had a say, guidance and counselling should already start at a very early age, and why not already in the Kindergarten ? To use an analogy, I would argue that it is pointless to warn young people of the dangers of drugs once they are fifteen and when quite a few of them might already have tried some, and similarly it does not make much sense to limit guidance and counselling to a couple of punctual interventions at so-called key-moments in an individual's educational or professional career. And although it most certainly is not my place to give you any advice on how you should run your affairs, I hope you take no offence if I nevertheless make the recommendation to start "guidance" and "counselling" as early as possible i.e. at the very beginning of education. Do not get me wrong: this suggestion of mine is not an encouragement for a sinister and obscure plot for social engineering. On the contrary, I would like to break down prejudice against certain careers and professions, and to do so, you have to start early on. A vital element of such a policy is of course genuine transparency of both the criteria in the education system and the standards in guidance and counselling. True "life-long" guidance would then also ensure that one element would at last be put in place that still is cruelly missing these days, (and) also in my home country, and that is the follow-up of individuals after their decisions, leading at the same time to an desperately needed new approach to guidance for adults. Then, and only then will guidance and counselling really matter.

This leads me then to the question whether

career counselling REALLY matters ?

Before he became Prime Minister in 1997, Tony Blair once said in the House of Commons in London that if Labour were to come to power, the priorities of his government would be “Education, Education, Education”, which prompted the then Prime Minister John Major to reply that he could not agree any more, though not necessarily in that order. And for many years now I have witnessed a similar development as regards guidance and counselling and I am very worried that with all the battle cries for more and better guidance, some people have already now decided that whatever is wrong in the labour and employment markets is not just down to the failings of an education system that allegedly does not educate and train young people properly, but also and above all is due to “bad” guidance and counselling. As guidance and career counselling are not precise sciences, they are not and will never be perfect but we should **not allow counsellors and counselling to become the new scapegoats** for all kinds of societal as well as individual failings.

After **“life-long learning”** we have moved on to “life-long guidance”, admittedly a logical step, but also one that can only precede the next equally logical step to “life-long working activity”.

Of course, guidance and career counselling matter but at the same time and as with education, more of the same is not necessarily better and equally something new and different for its own sake is not necessarily better either. The French “orientation”, the German “Beratung” as well as the English “guidance” and “counselling” have multi-layered meanings: for example they can have a sexual, a political or a religious connotation. A person can orientate or guide himself or somebody else in space as well as in time but these meanings always refer to an act or an activity of defining one’s own or somebody else’s position according to a given set-up. This is extremely important as a lot of counsellors tend to forget that guidance and counselling happen in a certain environment, in a specific context and that even if, as is only natural, varying counselling practices are rooted in different cultures, guidance and counselling related activities are an integral part of a system or set-up, e.g. an educational system that itself again is part of a greater societal construct. And therefore guidance and career counselling are not, cannot and must never be “l’art pour l’art”, “art for art’s sake”.

So **what IS career counselling ?**

We should not forget that the possibility to choose what you want to do as regards your professional life is a reasonably “modern” luxury and so is career counselling. Then, for a

start, there are huge problems associated with the concepts of guidance and counselling. Guidance and counselling or above all “good” or efficient guidance and counselling presuppose or at least used to presuppose that there are professions or careers that are distinctively different from other ones and that hence there are logical and equally distinct ways or steps to accede to them. And if it is the responsibility of the counselee to “choose” such a unique path leading to a distinct professional position, it is supposed to be the duty of the counsellor to ensure that this choice is made in accordance with the best “interests” of the counselee.

There are however major flaws in such a way of thinking in as far as it assumes that the decision to engage in further studies in order to attain a professional qualification is the outcome of a thoroughly thought through project, that such a choice reflects a intention in time, that it “projects” the individual into a kind of mystic vocational future where he will be able, one day, to enter the paradise reached by all those in the past who took an equally sound and logical decision and had travelled the same or at least similar paths. In today’s world however one can rightly doubt that there still exist that many clearly defined professional qualifications or careers and it is equally true to say that with ever greater access of increasing numbers of people to higher qualifications or professional careers, it is no longer the final goal nor even the road travelled that holds the key to later professional success, but it is all those less travelled and very often also less accessible paths and lanes that lead to that little extra, that specific plus, that extra competence, that will make the difference with competing travellers, and that might just get you that job you have been fighting for. At the same time, and even if this situation is quite wrongly now being perceived as a new one, it has always been extremely risky to make a long-term prognosis regarding the evolution certain professional careers will undergo. What is however genuinely new and getting increasingly complicated is to get an overview of all the routes that lead to those ever changing educational and vocational qualifications and careers with more or less uncertain futures, and therefore **information management** will be one of the greatest challenges facing guidance in the years to come.

The next question then is

what makes GOOD career counselling ?

Firstly I think I ought to let you in on a secret regarding my persona: I am part of that allegedly unfortunate generation that never had the benefit of guidance and I actually had

never set foot into a counselling service until I started working as an educational psychologist and guidance counsellor. So I belong to a proud generation of survivors, who were driven round, though never to school, in cars that were not equipped with seatbelts and on more than one occasion on my walk to school, I was drenched in rain but, surprising as it may seem, I did not melt, I did not dissolve. I had to undergo all kinds of awful experiences that would horrify today's youth or should I say above all their parents, who all too often seem to have completely forgotten what their own childhoods were like. And when I hear people my age - I am 57 - talk about how and when they decided this and that, I always feel like an utter fool, because I would have to admit that, rather than constantly taking apparently crucial "decisions", I have stumbled through life, I have regularly fallen and hurt myself more or less badly, but that each time and over and over again, I have managed, with a necessary amount of luck which I hope I will never run out of, to lift myself off the ground, get up and go on – and am still doing so today.

Then I think I ought to tell you about a certain Thorkild Grosboel, a Danish Lutheran priest caused great controversy in 2003 when he stated that he no longer believed in God. I must confess that I have a lot of sympathy with Mr Grosboel because I frequently feel the same way about guidance and counselling as Mr Grosboel obviously does about God. The more immediate problem facing his superior, the bishop as well as his parishioners however was that Mr Grosboel wanted to hang on to his job, as I obviously do too. I should however emphasize that my loss of faith is not in guidance and counselling themselves but in the ways they have been preached and practised for the last sixty years or so.

So, what does make GOOD counselling ?

Obviously and as with most professional activities, quality greatly depends on the individual delivering the service, and in the case of counsellors it is above all his **personal competences** that matter.

Then a good counsellor also knows that it is never about him, it is about the client, **it always is about the counselee.**

Finally, there are the **professional competences** of a good counsellor, but these can be acquired through rigorous study.

Good guidance needs good theory and it is impossible to overemphasise the importance of good theory: a clear conceptual framework can help us to make sense of human behaviour, sometimes to influence it and occasionally even allows us to predict it. There can indeed be

nothing more practical than a good theory, as in order to engage with the real world in an effective manner you need clearly defined conceptual tools that allow you to do so systematically. Without good theory a guidance counsellor is like a blind chicken pecking about aimlessly and though it might from time to time actually pick up a grain, this is not through any merit of its own but through sheer luck.

Guidance counsellors have however not been blind as a number of theories have allowed them to base their practices upon (J.D. Krumboltz, 1979; D. Super, 1990; J.L. Holland, 1997; ...). However, most of the theoretical concepts guidance and career counsellors have been able to rely on have one thing in common i.e. they are largely based on a **normative-prescriptive rational decision-making** model that is increasingly alien to real-world settings, and therefore frequently fails to provide the career counsellor and the client with the conceptual tools they need in today's world.

So let me ask you two "nasty" questions: **How many of you REALLY took the CONSCIOUS decision to become a career counsellor ?** I suspect none or only a very few of you ever took that decision, which leads me then to the next question of **why do you continue to base your counsel of students on a model that you did not follow yourself ?**

Remember, the so-called 'matching models' that still largely prevail in guidance and career counselling today and to a greater extent in the placement of employment seekers, were developed in the first half of the 20th century. Their goal was the optimal allocation of people to occupations using sophisticated test procedures such as the 'trait and factor' approaches. If it may be too harsh to label them as obsolete, these models should however be considered as dramatically insufficient.

Indeed, the majority of theoretical concepts, professional guidelines and practical instructions, confront counsellors as well as counselees in decision-making situations with demands to proceed **in a rational manner** or at least in as rational a manner as possible. In these theoretical models that are implicitly or explicitly based on a normative-prescriptive approach, the decision-maker will only be able to reach the best possible decision if he or she lets him- or herself be guided by reason. In such an "ideal" decision-situation, the decision-maker not only has all the information available on all the possible alternatives as well as even on those factors that are beyond his or her control, but he or she also has the ultimate luxury of endless time and, of course, unlimited cognitive abilities. And to top it all,

psychological and social factors, including motivation, are not or only very marginally taken into consideration.

However, as we all know, in practice, existential decisions such as choosing a career can only be dealt with in a very limited way within the boundaries of the normative-prescriptive decisions-making models.

So, **what is the WAY FORWARD ?**

Well, if **normative-prescriptive rational models focus on how people should take decisions**, a **descriptive approach concentrates on how people actually do take decisions in the real world**.

Such a descriptive approach implies the use of so-called **“simple” heuristics** i.e. **generalisations and “rules of thumb”** which people use whenever they make decisions within a limited time-frame, with limited knowledge and limited cognitive processing abilities. Fundamental to descriptive decision-making theories is their starting point of a **“bounded rationality”** i.e. contrary to normative-prescriptive decision-making theories, a descriptive decision-making approach does take into account people’s cognitive as well as social limitations.

The true success of these **“simple” heuristics** lies firstly in the fact that they are **“fast and frugal”** i.e. **they “employ limited time, knowledge and computation”**, (Gigerenzer and Todd 1999) and secondly, in their adaptability to real world settings, i.e. their so-called **“ecological rationality”**.

Institutions providing guidance should urgently implement a new approach to information management and move away from traditional supply-oriented to demand-oriented information systems. Lack of information is indeed no longer an issue today, **information overload** however is.

The role of the counsellor is then also increasingly changing into one of an expert who must **weigh and select information** and provide the necessary **specialist knowledge** to contribute to the decision-making process.

At the same time, the counsellor must ensure that the counselee can understand and help shape the decision-making process as this will provide the necessary ethical guarantee that the end-decision is that of the counselee. We should not forget that young people frequently are in a situation where nobody has ever taught them how to take decisions, for years they have merely consumed education, training and counselling, they have never had to commit

themselves to a certain direction, they have never even been prepared to do so. And would quite a few of us not prefer to surrender our freedom to someone else rather than exercise it ourselves - not least when the choices to be made, when the decisions to be taken are difficult ones. Here, the ability of the counsellor to achieve **“cognitive empathy”** i.e. to tune into the guiding heuristics of the counselee and to explore them with him or her, becomes a key competence in counselling.

So what do **counselees** make of the so-called **“simple” heuristics**

To a lot of young people it seems to make very little sense to embark on a potentially long and difficult voyage with the firm intention of getting to a certain destination when this destination may very well no longer exist once they get there - “there” or at least wherever they had been told, possibly by their careers counsellor, the destination was. Furthermore they are likely to be discouraged by all those people who allegedly or actually have travelled those roads before them only to find that the destinations no longer exist at all, have moved somewhere else and that the ways to get there have become fewer and very much more uncertain. In such an environment it is therefore hardly surprising that people are increasingly reluctant to engage in one single type of activity that used and that possibly still pretends to be the safe way to a specific career that is not only a long way but also and above all a long time away. In a complex world full of uncertainties, new types of behaviour have gradually developed that are based on a heuristical approach to “learning” and they are, surprisingly, not only very logical but they are evolving into a long-term view of personal development. Rather than now risk it all with one single placement on the virtual gambling table of educational and vocational opportunities, these new behavioural patterns not only avoid closing doors but aim at maximising the number of eventual future openings.

So funnily enough, it seems as if the increased insecurity caused by the unpredictable economic outlook and the highly unstable employment market is actually leading to a greater or at least a different rationality, not only in the choices young people end up making, but also in the very nature of the decision processes themselves. From a psychological point of view these new behavioural patterns go way beyond a mere adaptation to an uncertain situation but have become characteristic of the search of young people for the greatest possible freedom and autonomy in their present and eventual future activities.

I now want to tell you

what a good counsellor does NOT do.

We all know from experience that **people prefer to be told what they want to hear** and that they furthermore frequently and conveniently indulge in selective hearing. Hence it is hardly surprising that there are a lot of guidance counsellors who find nothing wrong with yielding to the improbable aspirations of clients.

This takes a lot of pressure off them, they can bask in the glory of doing the “right” thing. After all counsellors are in the people business, they are the “nice” ones, the “good” ones who give “positive” feedback to their clients even if the latter are not aware that the chalice they are handed is a poisoned one. Furthermore, these Pontius Pilate of counselling, as I am tempted to call them, can easily pass the blame onto somebody else if their clients’ future does, despite all the positive encouragements, not turn out as bright as they had been led to believe.

But **effective professional guidance is definitely not about telling fairy-tales** or going along regardless with the unrealistic hopes clients may have, never mind that such behaviour also is highly unethical. For we should not forget either that counsellor credibility constitutes the principal foundation upon which effective counselling is built.

Rest assured though, I do not advocate that counsellors simply tell their clients to “grin and bear it”. On the contrary, I would like to encourage a new realism in counselling, one that is based on “telling it like it is”, on encouraging clients to **“get real”**. And if such an approach might seem harsh or even cynical to the so-called positive thinkers, I would argue that it is in the long term far less cruel as it will better equip counselees to deal with the unfiltered reality, thus providing grounds for realism that is genuine optimism, grounded in the knowledge that they have to make the future themselves.

We should therefore no longer deceive ourselves and go on pretending that handing out false hopes is the right way forward. With youth unemployment hitting 50% and more in the stricken countries of peripheral Europe, we simply have to accept that our economic model no longer works as it cannot deliver enough high-value work for its ever more highly educated workforce. And no wishful thinking is going to change that situation any soon.

Finally, though I am hardly qualified to give any advice to counsellors in Turkey and do not think that guidance counsellors should be giving advice, I still would like to do so today. Please do warn your students against those counsellors who pretend to know where we are all heading towards, you might just as well send them straight away to a fortune-teller. Do

tell your counselees though to avoid the 'easy', the 'middle-of-the-road' option. For it is precisely the middle-class of middle-skilled and middle-income of office clerks and machine operators, that is disappearing fast, not to come back - their occupations falling victim to IT and automation. On the other hand there still exists plenty of work that cannot be mechanised because it would be either too complicated or too expensive to do so, work we truly can believe in e.g. manual labour. And before you now ridicule my words please consider what many so-called brain-workers do in leisure and retirement.

Now, at last, I come to my

CONCLUSION

Let me finish this short presentation by reading you the so-called 'Little Fable', a short fable-like story about a desperate mouse which **Franz Kafka** wrote in 1920. It was published posthumously by his friend Max Brod, who also gave it its title.

"Alas," said the mouse, "the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into." "You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.

Although these few lines are meant to be a fable, they lack an edifying message revealing only hopelessness. Kafka's 'Little Fable' pours scorn on the enlightening optimism characteristic of the genre and warns of a misguided life. The path between the narrowing walls of the trap can be interpreted as representing life with its different stages: the difficulty of finding oneself in youth, the ever more confining duties of adulthood and the inevitability of death. The cat's words then almost seem like a welcome invitation to get off the trodden path, to get out of "normality" and to venture into a fundamentally different avenue, not least because in the end we are anyway going to die. The trap can then be seen as reflecting our existential Angsts: if we cannot run away from external threats, we also seem to be unable to free ourselves from our own internal impulses.

I prefer however to interpret Kafka's 'Little Fable' differently, namely as an encouragement to tackle life head on and not merely wander aimlessly between its walls.

Hence I would like to encourage counsellors to engage with their clients in the pedagogics of reality or of realities, as promoted by the French philosopher and economist **Jean-Pierre**

Dupuy in his 2004 book: **'Pour un catastrophisme éclairé.'**, 'For an enlightened catastrophism'.

Its subtitle is 'Quand l'impossible est certain', 'when the impossible is certain.'

Well, if the impossible is already certain, then at least let us try and make it happen.

Thank you very much for your attention, and your patience.