

LIFE DESIGNING: A PASSING FANCY OR HERE TO STAY ?

(slide 1) Good guidance needs 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. Most of the theoretical concepts guidance 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 fail to provide the career counsellor and the client with the conceptual tools they need in today's world.

(slide 2) In recent years a growing number of scholars have started to investigate new theoretical avenues, and "Life-designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century" is probably amongst the more promising of these new approaches. The resulting shift in paradigms is however bound to meet with opposition from counsellors and clients alike as each their traditional roles are being challenged.

(slide 3) Furthermore, an approach that claims to assist people not only in their vocational careers but with the design of nothing less than their lives, inevitably runs the risk of being appropriated by all kinds of psycho-social charlatans. A third issue arises from its emphasis on transitions - people do not simply want to "pass through" their lives, they also and above all want to arrive at their destinations.

So, what actually is life-designing?

As we do not have much time, all I can tell you here and now is that life-designing is an attempt to connect Jean Guichard's theory of self-constructing and Mark Savickas' theory of career construction. But please do not hesitate to contact me for a two page summary of Savickas et al.'s position paper.

So, what do vocational guidance counsellors make of life-designing?

We organised three workshops on life-designing, two with guidance counsellors working in Public Employment Services in Luxembourg and one with an international group of school counsellors. As had to be expected, the reactions of the participants to the position paper were very mixed.

(slide 4) Firstly, quite a few wondered what, bar a greater emphasis on the need to take into account all of the clients' life contexts, was so radically 'new' about the concept of life-designing. Some argued that in the real-world settings of their work environments, they could not help but do so anyway.

(slide 5) Secondly, despite the fact that only one of the authors was from the US, the model of life-designing came across as a very "American" concept. We suspect that this may have to do with the cultural differences regarding education between 'old' Europe and the United States. Contrary to the US, in Europe and above all in continental Europe, young people are very much more likely to acquire, while still in full-time education or training, occupation-specific skills, specific vocational aspirations, and even professional identities.

(slide 6) Another reason may be a certain European reticence concerning anything that smacks of 'therapy'.

(slide 7) The emphasis on making people more flexible in their work lives was also met with equal scepticism as the participants very strongly objected to the idea of individuals, above all peripheral workers, locked in a permanent rat-race on the employment market.

Furthermore, if life-designing really were to replace classic vocational counselling in the long-term, counsellors foresaw an increased risk of clients being manipulated, not least as a function of labour-market needs.

As life-designing also implies a certain level of controlling, counsees might become 'dependent' on the counsellors and life-designing will then most certainly not achieve its ambition of emancipating clients.

Another question was, who is supposed to bear the responsibility if a client badly designs his or her life ?

And what about all those people who for various reasons e.g. limited cognitive abilities are simply unable to design their lives ?

(slide 8) It was hardly a surprise then that a few counsellors perceived life-designing more as a tool for aiding clients more concerned with life-style issues than with existential life orientations; the majority however were genuinely worried that if implemented, life-designing would end up taking away vital resources from classic vocational counselling, leading to a two-tiers society in which only those with good qualifications and social competences would benefit from life-designing with the less fortunate ending up getting a rough deal from under-resourced and under-staffed vocational counselling services.

(slide 9) Hence, all the participants of the workshops insisted on the importance of classic vocational counselling, arguing that the professional occupation of an individual will go on constituting a pivotal role in a person's life and will continue to give essential meaning to that life.

Part of their negative reactions can probably also be explained by them feeling challenged in their professional identity of vocational counsellors, a feeling echoed in statements such as not wanting to be social workers or life coaches never mind life-style gurus.

So where do we stand?

(slide 10) We share many of the concerns voiced by the participants of the workshops, above all the one regarding the crucial importance of a professional occupation. Parsons stated already in 1909, that it is better to choose a profession than to just get a "job" and we believe that in order to live an independent, self-determined existence, one needs a sense of professional personality based upon a status conferring profession. Unfortunately, below the academic qualification level, the modular vocational training model currently most favoured in Europe is based on the British NVQs. This approach does not however allow any room for the emergence of such a professional identity as it advocates unilaterally that individuals guide themselves as a function of the needs of labour market.

Research done in Germany has also shown that the frequency of "real" career changes has been grossly overestimated, above all because a change in job has wrongly been equated with a change in career. Therefore, so-called patchwork careers are often reflecting nothing but naturally occurring professional mobility.

Regardless, a central task of guidance remains that of supporting individuals in all kinds of transition processes.

In many countries, it is above all the transition from education into the labour market that causes the most difficulties. The acquisition of activity-related skills below the level of higher education, usually occurs without there being a coherent professional idea in place: we do however consider such an idea a prerequisite for integrated life-designing.

Obviously, it is unrealistic to expect other countries to adopt primary and secondary qualifications based on professional concepts as you would find in e.g. Luxembourg or Germany. Therefore, we suggest focusing on a professional, a vocational idea that disconnects people from the rapidly changing requirements of the labour market.

That is why the demands of lifelong learning and lifelong guidance should not lead counsellors to encourage individuals to only adapt their skills on a superficial level. On the contrary, guidance must enable the client to develop his or her overall professional personality.

Hence, research in life-designing counselling should focus on “internal” connections of competences, on substitution potentials in various professions as well as on the needs of the labour market for “professional personalities”.

(slide 11) Furthermore, we believe that research into life-designing counselling should also look into the heuristic theory of decision-making as an operational basis.

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 decision-making models. And this is precisely where the descriptive approach comes into play i.e. if the normative-prescriptive approaches 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.

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” and secondly in their adaptability to real world settings, i.e. their so-called “ecological rationality”.

The role of the counsellor is 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 shape the decision-making process as this will provide the necessary ethical guarantee that the end-decision is that of the counselee.

(slide 12) 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 is life-designing now a passing fancy or here to stay ?

(slide 13) We are convinced that the life-designing model certainly has the potential to grow into a new voluntary, transparent and emancipatory form of vocational counselling if it can embrace the vital importance of professional identities and if at the same time it manages to incorporate the so-called ‘simple’ heuristics as a decision-making process.

Furthermore, we should not lose sight of the ideal societal and economic conditions life-designing could potentially flourish in.

Finally, I would like to leave you with a quote by Maxim Gorki that describes our outlook on life-designing in a most eloquent way:

(slide 14) “When work is a pleasure, life is a joy.”

(slide 15) Thank you for your attention.

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