

LIFE-DESIGN: HERE TO STAY OR JUST A FAD ?

Jean-Jacques Ruppert and Bernd-Joachim Ertelt

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. 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 fails to provide the career counsellor and the client with the conceptual tools they need in today's world.

In recent years a growing number of researchers have started to investigate new theoretical avenues: "Life-designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century" by scholars from Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Switzerland, The Netherlands and the United States 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 both their traditional roles are being challenged. Furthermore, an approach that claims to assist people not only in their vocational careers but with the design of nothing less than their life, 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 foremost want to arrive at their destinations.

So, what actually is life-designing?

Life-designing is an attempt to connect the theories of self-constructing and of career construction (Savickas, et al., 2009; Guichard, 2005).

Five presuppositions characterise life-designing counselling:

- As we know the so-called 'matching models' that are still largely prevailing in vocational guidance 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 person and occupation using sophisticated test procedures such as the 'trait and factor' approaches. These models should now however be considered as obsolete. Professional identity rather is a complex dynamic process of mutual adaptation between an individual and his ecosystem and an individual's professional identity is permanently being shaped by the self-organisation of the diverse experiences in his daily life.
- In the field of careers information, vocational guidance must evolve away from providing ever more detailed descriptions of specific occupations to transmitting adequate information strategies to clients. On one hand, the professions and working conditions are changing ever more rapidly, and on the other, the risk of information overload is very much more real than that of a lack of information. Hence greater attention should be focused on the decision-making strategies of the clients. An important prerequisite for successful life-designing counselling is the ability for systemic taking into account of the complex, interactive and dynamic processes between the counselee and his reference persons or reference systems.
- It is paradoxical that much of counselling still is based on simple causal models and this despite the fact that practice teaches differently. Therefore, the existing approach

'diagnosis - indication - prescription' that was derived for counselling from medicine, needs to be replaced by iterative problem-solving strategies. Counselees and counsellors should over longer periods of time, shape the dynamic interaction of life-designing and involve the reference systems of the client.

- The existing counselling methods and instruments force the guidance counsellor to translate their clients' subjective perceptions of reality into a technical language, into a jargon the latter frequently do not understand. Therefore, instead of these abstract and invariant social or statistical norms, counsellors should use the linguistic and personally relevant reference system of the counselees. The professional counselling models and methods must therefore focus on an individual's constantly evolving reconstruction in his subjective and complex reality.
- Furthermore, as one of the main recurrent criticisms of counselling is the lack of empirically evaluated studies on its effectiveness, the existing techniques for evaluating the effectiveness of counselling must be adapted to these 'new' and complex life-designing conditions, and here the use of multivariate process-focused approaches should be actively promoted.

As a basic framework for life-designing counselling, the authors emphasize:

- the life-long, accompanying role of life-designing,
- the holistic approach that does not limit the client's self-construction to his professional role but takes into account all of his salient life-roles,
- the inclusion of the whole of the living environments, of all of the contexts of the client, and
- the preventive nature of life-designing interventions by paying, at an earlier stage, more attention to the client's life stories.

These presuppositions are necessary if the key objectives of life-designing counselling are to be achieved which are:

- to increase the flexibility of the client to his ever changing environments (adaptability),
- to assist the client's self-construction in aiding him to narrate his life-biography (narratability),
- to encourage the client to engage in all kinds of activities in order to promote the development of new personality dimensions such as self-efficacy (activity), and
- to make the client aware of the decisions and processes that have shaped his life so far so that they can be used in future self-constructions (intentionality).

Finally, the life-designing counselling model includes the following steps:

1. the counselee and the counsellor collaborate to define together the problem and identify the client's expectations regarding the outcome of the counselling,
2. the counselee and the counsellor explore how the client currently perceives himself in relation to his essential role requirements,
3. the narration of his biographies allows the client to review his life-stories and to open 'new' perspectives, to begin 'new' stories,
4. the problem the counselee and the counsellor had defined together at the onset is now being put into these 'new' perspectives, into these 'new' stories. This step will be completed when the client successfully achieves a synthesis between old and anticipated new, between old and 'new' stories,

5. the counselee is drafting an action plan and initiating concrete steps aimed at resolving the problem; at this stage, the inclusion and support of important others is vital,
and lastly
6. short- and long-term follow-up constitutes a necessary means of quality assurance of the implementation of the outcome of the counselling process, with, if required, further counselling.

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

We stressed earlier on the importance of good theory. In order to become a concept that really matters, a new approach has to pass the test of validity in the daily interactions counsellors have with their clients. Hence 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.

First, 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 but do so anyway.

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 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.

Another reason may be a certain European dislike of anything that smacks of therapy. In this context the proposal by the former Labour government in the UK to make long-term unemployed go for cognitive-behavioural therapy, was whole-heartedly rejected.

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, counselees might become 'dependent' on the counsellors and life-designing will then most certainly not achieve its ambition of emancipating clients.

Then, 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 simply are unable to design their life ?

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 away 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.

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 be explained with a feeling of possibly being attacked 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. One counsellor even said with reference to 'Club Med', the French corporation that pioneered all-inclusive holidays that she most certainly did not want to become a 'gentille organisatrice', a gracious, nice organiser of the life of 'gentil membres', gracious, nice guests or members in some surreal counselling Club Med.

So where do the authors of this paper stand?

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. Frank 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 (or identity) 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 however not 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 (Baron, 2008).

Research done in Germany (Seibert, 2007) 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; i.e. a change the professional biography. Therefore, so-called patchwork careers are often simply reflecting 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 this 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 Germany, Luxembourg, Austria and Switzerland. Therefore, we suggest focusing on a professional, a vocational idea that disconnects people from the rapidly changing requirements of the labour market.

The demands of lifelong learning and lifelong guidance should therefore 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/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".

Savickas et al. rightly insist on the necessity for further top-down theoretical research; here we would like to suggest a didactic rewriting of their position paper so that reaches out to the greatest possible number of practitioners. At the same time they also stress the importance of empirical bottom-up research strategies as practice will always inspire theory.

Furthermore, we believe that research into life-designing counselling should also concentrate more on the decision-making strategies of counselees. The operational basis for life-designing counselling could be the heuristic theory of decision-making. Here we leave behind the normative-prescriptive decision-making and problem-solving theories that, bar a few exceptions (e.g. J. Krumboltz's 'happenstances' or solution-focused counselling), inherently characterise most guidance methods (see Ertelt & Ruppert 2009).

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 such boundaries. 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. Fundamental to descriptive decision-making theories is their starting point of a “bounded rationality” i.e. contrary to normative-prescriptive decision-making theories, descriptive decision-making theories do 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, G. and Todd, P., 1999) and secondly in their adaptability to real world settings, i.e. their so-called “ecological rationality”.

The role of the counsellor is 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 guarantee the ethically standardised goal that the decision is that of the counselee. 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.

In this context, the concepts of “ecological rationality“ and “social rationality“ are very helpful as they describe the compatibility of real-world environments with individual heuristics, and take into account emotions and the integration into social norms. The finality of “ecological rationality” is to make fast and frugal and relatively accurate decisions that are furthermore ethically acceptable as regards their “social rationality” (Gigerenzer 2002).

Life-designing: here to stay or just a fad ?

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 does embrace the vital importance of professional identities and if at the same time it manages to incorporate the so-called ‘simple’ heuristics as decision.

But when pondering about the direction we would like life-designing to take, we should not lose out of sight the ideal societal and economic conditions it could possibly flourish in.

And therefore emancipatory life-designing counselling will require that we also start thinking about “reassembling the social” because as Bruno Latour says in his book of the same title “emancipation does not mean ‘freed from bonds but *well-attached*’ ”.

Finally, we would like to leave you with a quote by the Russian dramatist Maxim Gorki (1868-1936) that describes our outlook on life-designing in a most eloquent way:

“When work is a pleasure, life is a joy.” (“When work is a duty, life is slavery)”

Thank you for your attention.