

1 *Jean-Jacques Ruppert and Andreas Frey*

2 **"Workers on the Periphery of the Employment Market:**

3 **Bad Career Choice or Bad Life Designing?"**

Buona sera, my name is Jean-Jacques Ruppert and I am here on behalf of the Luxembourg based Applied Vocational Psychology and Policy research unit. The other author of this talk is Andreas Frey of the University of Applied Labour Studies of the Federal Employment Agency in Mannheim in Germany. Andreas has asked me to present his apologies to you for not being here today with us due to a prior commitment.

I still remember being told by one of the authors of the life designing paper that traditional career counselling or vocational guidance was dead. This view is echoed in the position paper where we can read that *"We can no longer speak confidently of 'career development' or of 'vocational guidance' "*. I must confess that I was somewhat stunned at the time because despite my conviction that the traditional matching model that still prevails in large quarters in the world of counselling no longer provides either counsellors or counselees with the conceptual tools needed in today's world, I still feel that the optimal allocation of individuals to occupations or working sets can be and often still is extremely powerful.

Hence our contribution **"Workers on the periphery of the employment market: bad career choice or bad life-designing?"** tries to address a much wider issue than just the question of whether life designing can develop into a viable concept, into a real alternative for the more traditional interventions. If however we accept as is stated in the Life designing paper that *"People's careers are constructed as individuals make choices that express their self-concepts."* and that *"The self-concept also is constructed through the specific experiences that people have had in environments that they have experienced"*, then we are entitled to ask what life designing has to offer or should we say to offer extra to those individuals whose professional experiences have exclusively or almost exclusively been on the periphery? If life designing really is to constitute a paradigm for career construction in the 21st

century, then it clearly must deliver not just something new or different, but something better than the existing approaches.

When a few years ago Joachim and I asked counsellors for their views on life designing, one point they all made, besides the fact that the paper itself was not only extremely difficult to digest, was that they could not see how life designing could be implemented in the real world. We concluded at the time that this rejection might be due to a misunderstanding of life designing as a new model rather than a tentative framework. Discussions we have recently had on life designing with a variety of people have however confirmed our suspicions that life designing still fails to attract those people who can make its success, that is the practitioners. The worry that a life designing counsellor will be expected to be a jack-of-all trades: guidance counsellor, social worker, educator, therapist, and so on, while in practice being a master of none, is real, and one the proponents of life designing will have to deal with. Of course, policy makers are keen on the idea of life-designing: how could they resist the temptation of getting two or three professionals all packed into one, and above all for the price of one? Policy-makers might indeed want to replace several existing specialist professionals with a “one-size-fits-all” life designing counsellor. We do however believe that we need to maintain experts in each field in order to provide adequate specialist services. And it also seems that this is precisely what counselees would prefer. So if the scholars who have designed the life designing framework want their idea to succeed, they need to make sure that it appeals to practitioners as well as to the general public.

The Life designing paper states ⁴ *“How may individuals best design their own lives in the society in which they live?”*

These words summarise the scope but also the limitations of the life designing concept. One word that in our opinion is however missing is *“work”*.

A life designing counselor, just like any other counsellor, still deals with ⁵ *individuals*. It still is the individual who is at the centre of attention with social and/or societal aspects coming second. With life designing the traditional emphasis on the individual has therefore not really shifted and life designing still puts a heavy burden on the individual. When speaking of individuals we cannot ignore the issue of individual differences either. The life designing paper does not make any reference to

individual differences and the question of what to do with those individuals who simply are unable to design their lives, e.g. due to limited cognitive abilities, remains unanswered.

6 The word *design* or designing also causes concern: design implies the creation of a plan for the construction of an object or a system and in the case of an individual designing his or her life, it refers to that individual drawing a blueprint of his or her life. 7 As life designing demands a certain level of control by the individual over the process of designing his or her life, we assume that *best* refers primarily to "how" individuals should go about designing their life. Nevertheless the concept of design implies a certain quality of outcome, but with different individuals with different abilities to design their lives and relying on different approaches or methods to do so, life designing does not necessarily lead to a quality outcome one would usually associate with design.

8 Furthermore the verb "*may*" seems to indicate that it is not a foregone conclusion that an individual will actually choose to design his or her life. 9 This is to me a fundamental point that reminds me of the famous chapter from Book Five: "Pro and Contra" in Dostoyevsky's 1880 novel 'The Brothers Karamazov' called "The Grand Inquisitor," in which Dostoyevsky imagines Jesus Christ visiting Earth while the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor is burning heretics. The Inquisitor arrests Jesus and tells him to return to heaven or face inquisition himself, contending that our free will is the greatest burden the humans face, "*for nothing has ever been more insufferable for man and for human society than freedom! But do you see these stones in this bare, scorching desert? Turn them into bread and mankind will run after you like sheep, grateful and obedient, ...*". Most of the students I see during their transition from education into vocational training or into higher education, fit this description and their demand for information and counselling frequently fails to hide a barely-hidden plea just to be told what to do. 10 It would however be unfair to blame these young people for their ways as these only reflect "*the society in which they live*". Nobody has ever taught them 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. Moreover I cannot rid myself of the feeling that quite a few of us would rather

surrender our freedom to someone else than exercise it ourselves - not least when the choices to be made are difficult ones.

The people I meet at the public employment service are somewhat different: they want the missing word that is **11** “work”, they want above all to be given the means to have a life in “*the society in which they live*”, they want the ‘*panem*’ to take part in the ‘*circenses*’, they want to be given the means of life to have a life. Once they have those means at their disposal, yes, then they might, I stress ‘*might*’ eventually consider looking further afield but nothing is less certain.

Hence Andreas and I would like to plead for greater humility not only from the proponents of life designing but also with guidance and counselling on the whole since so much is dependent on factors over which neither counselees nor counsellors have much control in “*the society in which they live*”.

12 Regarding “*live*” or “*lives*”, I would like to quote from a presentation I made here in Padova two years ago. The American writer and author of ‘*Infinite Jest*’ David Foster Wallace, who died 5 years ago, reflected in an address he gave to the graduates of Kenyon College, Ohio in 2005 on the difficulties of daily life in these words: **13** “*There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys, how’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?”* “.

To me these words capture what life really is about, it just simply is, here and now, all the time, all around us, and all we have to do is to grasp it. “*This is water.*” is however such a big concept that I cannot help wondering if with life designing we are not trying to squeeze real life into a sort of Procrustean bed.

Can we not simply accept, and to me it does not really matter whether we now call it a bad career choice or bad life designing, that much of our lives, including our professional lives, lies outside of our control? Could it not simply be that life chooses a general direction for you allowing you just a few “*minor*” adjustments? Or to quote the famous American psychologist **14** B. F. Skinner: “*I did not direct my life. I didn’t design it. I never made decisions. Things always came up and made them for me. That is what life is*”. Obviously such a statement has to be taken with a pinch of salt and such a point of view might easily be labeled deterministic but is it not true that

we only complain about determinism when faced with an obstacle we consider to be unfair?

Back to the question of what life designing has to offer or has to offer **extra** to those individuals whose professional experiences have exclusively or almost exclusively been on the periphery.

Unfortunately we can only conclude that life designing offers no more answers to that question than a traditional approach. But that is not down to life designing per se, it is simply down to the fact that, like any other approach, life designing is not addressing the real issues facing these individuals. Professional experiences on the periphery of the employment market are related life experiences on the periphery of society. And it is a sad irony that 50 years after Pierre Bourdieu's works on social reproduction, the opening lines of the **15** French sociologist Camille Peugny's book 'Le destin au berceau: Inégalités et reproduction sociale', roughly translated as 'Destiny in the cradle: Inequalities and social reproduction' states the following: *"In the France of today, seven out of ten children of white collar workers, have a position of white collar worker a few years after the end of their studies; however, seven out of ten children of blue collar workers remain confined to blue collar jobs. More than two centuries after the Revolution, birth conditions continue to determine the fate of individuals. One does not become a blue collar worker, one is born a blue collar worker"*.

To make matters even worse, I doubt that education alone can change this situation. I know that I have regularly been accused of being an educational/social Darwinist when saying that when push comes to shove, the value of a qualification is only high as the labour a market is willing to pay for it. Of course, there is more to education than its utilitarian value but a young man with a degree in media studies who drives a taxi is at the end of the day unfortunately still only a taxi-driver earning a taxi-driver's wages. Or as **16** John Marsh remarks in his book 'Class dismissed' (2011): *"all the education in the world ... will not make those jobs pay more than they do. A waitress with a B.A. still hustles for tips"*. And if we bear in mind that the half-life of certain educational qualifications is very short, the likelihood of that waitress finding an occupation that corresponds to her qualifications, gets smaller with each passing day.

So IF you have good qualifications, AND if you have the support of your family and friends, AND if you are well connected, AND if you can benefit from a so-called old boys network, AND if you do not have any or not too many financial constraints, AND if you possess good personal and social competences, then YES, life designing might be an option for you.

But IF you are unskilled or have only few qualifications, AND if your social environment is unsupportive, AND if you cannot rely on acquaintances to lend you a helping hand to get a job, AND if your social and personal skills leave something to be desired, then NO, we cannot see what life designing could possibly do for you.

17 Thank you for your attention.