

Counselling Socially Disadvantaged Clients (iCeGS Annual Lecture 2024)



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Abstract

Although research and daily experience show that social variables are decisive in career development, they remain underrepresented in the research field of career counselling and guidance, which often focuses on psychological variables. Guidance services have expanded from schools to a more general adult population, particularly low-skilled workers in precarious labour market positions, requiring counsellors to adapt their methods. Blustein's psychology of working theory and Bourdieu's habitus theory place social variables at the centre of career development, critiquing the notion of free will that dominates traditional theories.

The author of this paper will share research findings that demonstrate how social class and gender influence career choices. For example, studies show that leisure activities and habitus shape occupational preferences and aspirations among 16-year-olds and young adults. Another study based on Blustein's theory reveals that low-skilled youth feel less control over their futures, with aspirations limited by social constraints.

There will also be a discussion about how the Career Construction Interview (CCI), a narrative-based method, can help disadvantaged clients by combining micro-narratives into an empowering macro-narrative. This will be supported by case examples from research on low-skilled women. Finally, the Bourdieusian concepts of socio-analysis and habitus will be explored for their potential use in enriching the analysis of career stories in counselling.

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1. Introduction

This paper is a written record of the 2024 iCeGS Annual Lecture which I delivered in November 2024. It was both an honour and a pleasure to be invited to give the annual lecture and to be among so many distinguished professionals in our field who have been annual iCeGS lecturers before me. It was an added pleasure to present in England as I did my doctoral training in this country with John Killeen (1946-2003) at the University of Hertfordshire and I owe much of my career to that experience, learning from him how important good and rigorous research is to practice.

Career counselling is an applied science, based on psychological career theories. Although social context is acknowledged in many of them, the methods applied are mainly based on psychology. My experience both as a counsellor and researcher tells me that counselling outcomes with our clients vary substantially. I will argue in this paper that a way forward in improving outcomes would be to embrace the impact of social variables in counselling, especially social class. This is important as career counselling services have recently expanded to adults in precarious social positions, such as services provided by adult education centres. Counsellors need to be sensitive to the needs of adults in a precarious position in the labour market, especially needs that derive from their social situation. I will present possible ways of attending to these needs.

Career counselling is based on applying theories and research in the disciplines of counselling psychology and vocational psychology. Methods in career counselling are mainly based on these theories. Although there are connections to sociological theories, these are much looser and rarely considered as a basis for career counselling methods. The leading idea in this paper is to ask why we do not use these theories more in praxis and how that could be realised.

In my research I have been very interested in social variables, but although I have seen results that are of theoretical interest, I have not made the effort to think about how many of them could be used in actual counselling. My question is therefore: How can we better integrate social variables into counselling?

Another research interest of mine has been evaluating outcomes of career education and career counselling, which I am doing now. A third area of research is the Career Construction Interview, a method developed within Career Construction Theory. I am combining these three themes of research in this paper in search for ways to be of better service to socially disadvantaged clients in counselling.

This discussion will examine how social variables can be addressed in the Career Construction Interview (CCI). This exploration is informed by my research and by the theoretical contributions of Bourdieu and Blustein. I will provide a concise overview of these frameworks and present findings from research projects where their concepts have been applied. Subsequently, I will introduce Savickas's theory of Career Construction and the CCI as a narrative method. The discussion will

conclude with an analysis of two case studies involving socially disadvantaged clients, demonstrating how socio-analysis can enhance counselling outcomes.

2. Bourdieu's theories

Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical work was deeply influenced by his own social trajectory (Swartz, 1997, Bourdieu, 2008). Coming from a modest background in the southwest of France, he navigated the elite educational system, ultimately graduating from one of France's most prestigious institutions and becoming a professor at the Collège de France—the highest academic position in the country. This experience informed his critical perspective on the elitist nature of such systems. Bourdieu's theories and methods reflect his critique, seeking to expose how social structures reproduce inequality despite the appearance of meritocracy.

Many of the theoretical concepts in Bourdieu's theory are of interest in career theory as they evolve around cultural influences and decision making. Choices and tastes in everyday life are a major area of study, and the correspondence between the social way of being and choice. At the same time, Bourdieu criticised rational choice theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, Swartz, 1997). Good practical decisions are often taken without knowing or rationalising, they are taken because we know unconsciously from our social experience what is best to decide.

Let us look at three concepts that can usefully be included in the career counselling process: symbolic violence, socio-analysis and habitus.

Symbolic violence

One of Bourdieu's key concepts is symbolic violence. To understand the social forces that are at play in our societies and the role of symbolic violence we can consider recent events in Iceland. On November 10th, 2023, a huge seismic event shook the fishing village of Grindavík, creating fissures in the town, that were enormous both in length and depth, followed by a series of volcanic eruptions in the close vicinity. The nearly 4000 villagers had to evacuate their homes on that day and will not be able to return in the foreseeable future. A year later, in November 2024, all the inhabitants had found new homes, apart from 100 low-income inhabitants, about 2,5 % of the villagers. Social forces had hindered them in overcoming the situation created by the forces of nature. Remarkably, it did not become an issue in the media that it was precisely the most socially disadvantaged people in the community who were still without a home. This is an aspect of what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence, i.e. when injustices are considered natural. Injustice is an inevitable 'fact of life', and people do not perceive it (Swartz, 1997). This is confirmed by the fact that, in Iceland, the news of the 100 socially disadvantaged persons for whom no solution had been found after a whole year, did not cause any reaction.

Socio-analysis

At the end of his life Bourdieu (2004/2008) introduced the concept of socio-analysis to his theory and used it in analysing his own trajectory. With socio-analysis one gains knowledge of one's position in the power structure and analyses schemes of perception that so often are at the root of social misery (Bourdieu, 2004/2008). A focus of socio-analysis is people's position in the power structure and their outlook or perception of social systems. How are they dominated and how do they themselves contribute to their own domination?

Habitus

Habitus is defined as a social subjectivity, i.e. a meaning making structure that originates in one's social environment and social position. Habitus thus influences our value system, choices and everyday practices as well as bodily postures and ways of being. As members of a social group, we acquire necessary mental schemata to be able to perceive the structure or phenomena in question, be it speech, behaviour or work of art (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This is important from the perspective of careers. A person who is familiar with a certain milieu from his upbringing, has an advantage in a career positioned in that milieu.

Correspondence factor analysis enables Bourdieu to analyse and map positions within social space (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This method resonates with Bourdieu's emphasis on relationality, as he believes that 'the real is relational', suggesting that reality is fundamentally constituted by relationships.

Research drawing on Bourdieu

The following section examines results from two of my research projects that used Bourdieu's theoretical framework (Vilhjálmsdóttir & Arnkelsson, 2007; Vilhjálmsdóttir & Arnkelsson, 2013), offering insights relevant to counselling socially disadvantaged clients.

When reviewing my research, I have identified three insights that I believe would be of value for counsellors working with socially disadvantaged clients. They are:

1. habitus can often be identified through cultural and leisure activities and describes one's position in social space;
2. young people readily form habitus groups, and these groups provide a context for their thinking and therefore for their career decision-making;
3. girls tend to be more interested in occupations that give prestige, and boys in those that offer a high income.

Two habitus studies were conducted in Iceland. The first with 911 teen-age participants (16 years old). The second with 476 participants aged 19-22. The habitus was operationally defined by type and frequency of leisure time activities in the following areas: (a) television, (b) films, (c) reading, (d) musical activities, (e)

music listened to (f) sports activities, (g) summer activities, (h) attendance of art events.

In the former study five habitus groups were formed based on correspondence factor analysis of 90 leisure and culture items. The following five habitus groups were formed:

1. music listeners
2. classical music and poetry
3. feminine
4. sports and films;
5. science and literature (Vilhjálmsson, 2004).

The latter study was conducted with an older age group, ten years later showed similar results. On the basis of 145 cultural and leisure items with young adults, four habitus groups were formed:

1. sports and rock music
2. literature
3. pop and fashion
4. music (for further reading see Vilhjálmsdóttir & Arnkelsson, 2013)

Music items distinguished best between the habitus groups.

Even though the habitus groups were formed with leisure activities, they formed a pattern that is strongly linked to social variables, such as SES, gender and place of living. In accordance with Bourdieu's theory likes and dislikes in leisure and cultural activities are strongly linked to social status and give information on one's social position (Bourdieu, 1984). This information can be used in career counselling and in the Career Construction Interview in particular, as we shall see further on.

Another study on gender differences in occupational thinking showed relevant results for use in career counselling. Eleven occupations (Car mechanic, Electrician, Engineer, Lorry driver, Nurse, Physician, Primary school teacher, Salesman, Seaman, Secretary, and Welder) were measured on 12 scales such as (high-low prestige, high-low salary, high-low interest, high-low responsibility, etc.) Correspondence factor analysis showed that girls are interested in occupations that they find prestigious (see figure 1) and boys are interested in occupations that they think give high salaries.

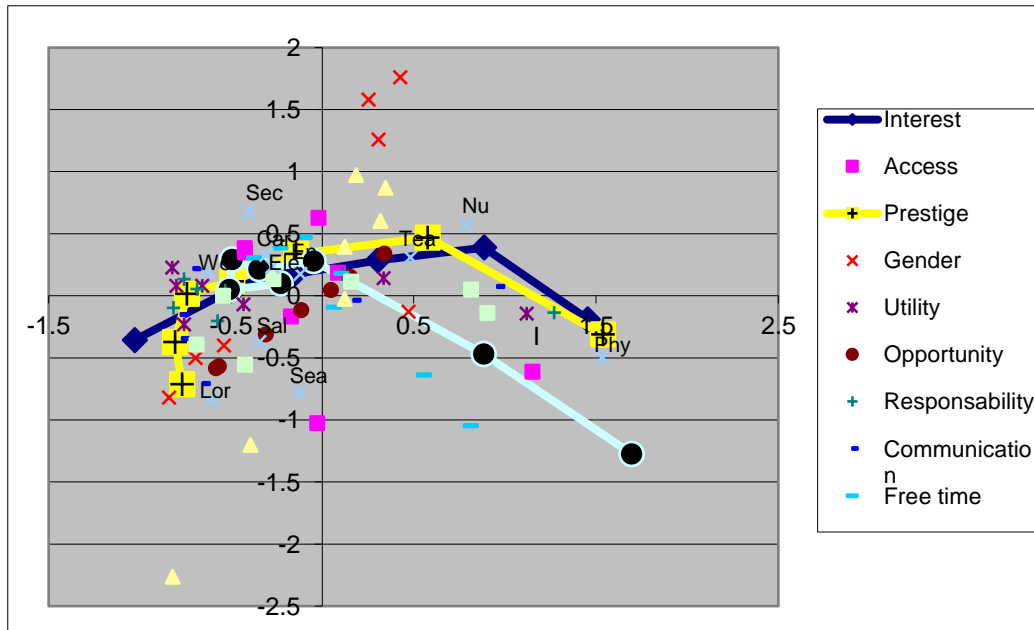


Figure 1. Correspondence factor analysis of occupational thinking with girls

A correspondence factor analysis (CFA) map is in fact a graphical display of a big contingency table. If distances on the map are small between variables it indicates that the relevant categories are related in social space, i.e. girls are very interested (blue line) in the occupation of physician, that they also find very prestigious (yellow line). The results of this study (Vilhjálmsson & Arnkelsson, 2007) give interesting information on the way girls and boys evaluate certain occupations in a different manner. The implications we can draw from this study, from the perspective of career counselling, is the emphasis girls put on prestige in their occupational interests. Why do girls and women value prestige more than income in their interest of occupations? We will return to this question when discussing the case studies.

3. Blustein's psychology of working theory

The Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) was designed to better understand the working lives of marginalised groups (Blustein, 2006). It is particularly well suited for studying people with limited career opportunities (Hirschi, 2018). Blustein is of the opinion that poverty and unemployment should be in focus of vocational psychology and that career counselling should shine a spotlight on precarity. Yet, in many cases career guidance policy and practice has neglected low qualified workers.

Like Bourdieu, Blustein (2006) criticises the idea of free will in career development, especially the American dream of equal opportunity. Instead, a central concept is decent work as a human right. Decent work has been defined by ILO (The International Labour Organization) as "productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity" (International Labour Organisation, 1999). Work is considered as decent when: it pays a fair income,

guarantees a secure form of employment and safe working conditions. Blustein and associates have developed a measure of decent work (Duffy et al., 2017).

Blustein criticises theories and practices within vocational psychology and career counselling for overlooking the needs of the poor and unemployed (Blustein, 2006). He argues that vocational psychology is at a point where it must decide either 'to continue to create knowledge and services for middle-class populations with some degree of choice in their lives or to expand our inclusiveness to include people without as much volition about education, training, and work' (Blustein, 2011, p. 316). If we choose to include the poor and the unemployed in our work, we need to improve our knowledge of those work situations.

Research drawing on Blustein

Inspired by Blustein's theory I conducted a study in 2021 on young adults (18-29), who had dropped out of upper secondary education and had been working for the last six months. Participants were 154 young working adults, the majority of which were of low social standing. Most (56%) of my participants had experienced unemployment, whereas only 7% of the general population in this age group have, meaning that they are having a much harder time in the labour market than their peers (Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2021). I have selected the following three findings from the study to highlight results that can possibly be of help in counselling socially disadvantaged clients.

Firstly, the young working adults that have not finished secondary education are less positive about their future, more indifferent to it and have difficulties in making future career decisions, compared to peers. A measure of career adaptability was administered to the sample. Participant's score on the international items of the Icelandic version of the career adaptability scales (CAAS-I) were compared with national group norms by age group (Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2017). Results revealed that participants score significantly lower on concern and control scales. The concern dimension of career adaptability refers to a person that has become aware of her future and needs to plan ahead. Those who lack adaptability of concern are indifferent to their future. The control dimension refers to a person who has increased control over her/his future career and is decisive in dealing with tasks at hand. Those who lack adaptability of control have difficulties making decisions about their future (indecision) (Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2017).

Secondly, participants were asked what line of work they would like to pursue, if they had the possibility. Two thirds (66%) of the participants aspired to become professionals or technicians if there were no obstacles in their way. Most professionals and technicians are trained in universities, a path that is closed unless they finish upper secondary school.

Thirdly, female participants consider their work to be less decent, compared to men. This is no doubt linked to the fact that their income was lower than that of the male

respondents. One of the subscales of the Icelandic Decent Work Scale is adequate compensation.

This study reveals that young working adults who have not finished upper secondary education have difficulty in managing and deciding about their future careers and it is an impediment for them to secure decent work, especially the women.

4. Savickas' Career Construction Theory

Career Construction Theory (CCT) developed by Savickas is based on extensive knowledge in psychological theories, the convergence of several major career development theories and narrative counselling. 'Career construction theory is about how individuals build careers and construct themselves, impose directions on their vocational behaviour and make meaning of their careers' (Savickas, 2013, p.147).

Two meta competencies are in focus, identity and career adaptability.

1. In career construction theory, identity involves how people think of themselves in relation to social roles (Savickas, 2011, p. 17).
2. "Career adaptability is a psycho-social construct that denotes an individual's readiness and resources for *coping with current and anticipated tasks of vocational development*. The adaptive fitness of attitudes, beliefs, and competencies – the ABCs of career construction – *increases* along the developmental lines of concern, control, [curiosity] and confidence" (Savickas, 2005, p. 46).

This theory has produced two instruments: The Career Adapt-Ability Scale (CAAS) that measures the career adaptability construct and the Career Construction Interview (CCI) a new model for career counselling, based on social constructionism and narrative. It aims to 'construct career through small stories, deconstruct and reconstruct the small stories into a large story, and co-construct the next episode in the story' (Savickas, 2011, p. 256). The CCI has a set of five questions on role models, favourite TV shows, magazines or computer games, all-time favourite book or movie, favourite motto and early recollections (see Figure 2). The answers to the five questions are woven together into a narrative. They produce self-defining stories from the life of the client and allow the counsellor and client to elicit together a narrative for comprehending and constructing the life story. Savickas emphasises that people tell the stories that they need to hear (2011), they do not come up with the same stories at different phases in their lives.

| Question | Purpose |
|--|---|
| How can I be useful to you as you construct your career? | Elicit counselling goals |
| Who did you admire when you were growing up? List three heroes/role models. | Portray the self |
| What attracts you to your favourite magazines or television shows? | Indicate manifest interests, preferred work setting in which to enact self |
| What is your favourite book/movie? Tell me the story. | Links self to settings |
| Tell me your favourite saying or motto? | Give advice to yourself and offer support and strategies for constructing the next episode in the story |
| What is your earliest recollection? | State the central preoccupation or story |

Figure 2. Career construction interview questions and their purpose (Hartung, 2015)

Research drawing on Savickas

One of several research projects of mine based on the Career Construction Interview was with two low-skilled women (Vilhjálmisdóttir, 2018). Their situation in life was very similar. Both had children as adolescents, were single mothers, and victims of domestic violence. However, one showed much greater strengths in career adaptability and had a positive outlook on life, whereas the other was stuck in her problems. In the case studies that follow I will examine whether the way forward for the woman stuck in her problems, is to use theories and research that look seriously at the impact of social variables on careers.

Case 1: Eva

Eva is a 34-year-old, retail worker and has been working as such for the past year. For four years prior to that she received health insurance benefits because she suffered from severe anxiety and physical illness. Six months ago, she entered the adult training centre and participated in a counselling program there. "Entering here are the best steps I have ever taken." Eva is a devoted mother of two girls. The older girl was born when Eva was 17 years old. From that age, until she was 23 years old, Eva was in an abusive relationship.

Eva's first CCI session

Eva's answer to the opening question, How can I be useful to you as you construct your career? is as follows: "I just really want to know which direction to take and hmmm... that I can be positive towards my current situation." A week earlier Eva had enrolled in a training programme that provides the equivalent of a high school education. "That is a big step for me... really scary stuff. Really. I need to get over this fear."

When asked about role models, Eva mentions her paternal grandmother, without hesitation. After the counsellor tells her that she can think about singers and film stars that she looked up to when she was older, Eva names Tina Turner and Celine Dion as role models being strong and kind women. Tina Turner's strength has been an inspiration to Eva: 'the way she deals with this completely insane husband, Ike..' 'Her faith helps her ... and she is kind to his children, whom she raises as her own.' It is not surprising that Eva says that her all-time favourite story is the film *What's love got to do with it*, based on Tina Turner's life. Tina's strengths helped her out of the abusive relationships she was in with her husband. 'She frees herself from Ike. Through religion she got this strength.'

Eva's early recollection evolve around having the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings and being alone with them in their home. She labelled her third recollection: *When victories in tournaments started kicking in*. She remembered with pride that she was more successful in tournaments than rich girls in the town that had much better horses than she had. 'Here I did things little by little, my parents gradually gave me a better horse and so on. Remember my motto: Good things happen slowly. You do not start at the top.'

Eva's second CCI session

Eva's early recollections tell a tale of insecurity, fear and responsibility. The last Early Recollection - ER has the solution. Everything will turn out fine for Eva, even though it happens slowly. She was not born to riches, but with hard work and her strengths she will win in the end. Like her role model Tina Turner, she cares for others and has an understanding of other people. When talking about career plans, she says that after high school she wants to become a human resource manager, a plan that is well compatible with her strengths and talents. The Icelandic version of the Career Adaptability Scale was administered to Eva and is shown in Figure 3. Results on the CAAS-I support her story of growing strength as progress in career adaptability is visible on all sub-scales.

| | Concern | Control | Curiosity | Confidence | Co-operation | Contribution | Total |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| CAAS-I T1 | 3.8 (59%) | 2.5 (6%) | 2.7 (16%) | 2.8 (3%) | 3.3 (6%) | 3.2 (7%) | 3,05 (3%) |
| CAAS-I T2 | 4.5 (92%) | 5 (100%) | 3.7 (66%) | 4.2 (64%) | 4.9 (87%) | 5 (100%) | 4,5 (92%) |
| CAAS-I T3 | 4 (77%) | 3,3 (19%) | 3,3 (61%) | 4 (64%) | 3,9 (27%) | 4 (46%) | 3,8 (44%) |

Figure 3. Eva's results on CAAS-I, before and after CCI sessions and five weeks later (% percentile rank in the national comparison group)

Case 2: Betty

Betty is a 27-year-old factory worker, who has had several low wage jobs over the past years. She became a mother when she was 17 years old and now has two children. She no longer lives with the father of the children, but he keeps harassing Betty because of money issues and the education of their children. For the past months they have waged a custody battle. After Betty became a mother, she tried on four occasions to start high school studies but had learning difficulties that were diagnosed as associated with maternal depression. She was clinically depressed for two years. All her four siblings have graduated from university and Betty says that this is in keeping with her family's values. She is currently in group counselling working on personal issues.

Betty's parents divorced when she was 10 years old. Betty was traumatised by witnessing her mother's nervous breakdown when she discovered her husband's long-standing affair. Betty has found it difficult to understand that a few years after the divorce her mother remarried, that she overcame her problems.

Betty's first CCI session

Betty's answer to the opening question (How can I be useful to you as you construct your career?) of the CCI is: 'I would like to know how I can arrange things so that my surroundings are more supportive. Where does my responsibility lie and when does it lie with the situation I am in? I am extremely ambitious, but something always stands in my way, and I am blown off course. I haven't made any progress in 10 years.' When the counsellor asks Betty what her future goals are she says she wants to go to Business school. In fact, the answer to the opening question is not very clear but it reveals that because of hindrances, such as children, difficulties in finding suitable housing, her anxiety and tendency to procrastinate, she has not been able to reach her goals in education.

Betty has difficulties talking about role models but finally mentions her 9th grade teacher and her current lawyer. The teacher was self-confident, sure of himself and was so convincing in his rhetoric. 'My lawyer really has characteristics that I would like to have... He is self-confident and somehow, I like his way of thinking'.

Betty's favourite story is a novel she read for the first time when she was 12 years old about a slave girl, Korka. She was enslaved by Vikings when she was a young girl in 9th century Ireland and taken from her family and brought to Iceland. Korka was self-confident and a strong character. Nobody could bully her. It is interesting that Betty says that she cannot remember if Korka became free from slavery in the end or not. In the actual novel, Korka becomes free.

When asked about early recollections she remembers that she was playing in a park with her sister and a powerful man in the community passed by just when they were picking flowers in the park, something that was forbidden. He was very angry and yelled at them, calling them names. 'I was so scared that I peed in my pants... I think

my sister did not feel as shocked as I was.’ Betty’s title for this recollection is: *Powerful man abuses his position*.

A second early recollection was when she tried to imitate her sister who cheated on exams in school. Betty was caught cheating and felt very bad about it. Her sister, who has now finished a university degree, was proud of her grades, even though she cheated. ‘My sense of justice was really hurt’, says Betty. This recollection is given the title: *A student is caught cheating*.

Her third recollection concerns the many times she moved as a child. The positive side of this experience is good adaptability. The fourth early recollection Betty talks about is titled *Betrayal*. This is when she witnessed her mother’s breakdown when she heard about her father’s affair. She even thinks that this was a more difficult experience for her than for her mother, since Betty knows now that her mother had known about the father’s previous affairs. Betty believes she has had a hard time trusting men ever since.

Betty’s second CCI session

In the reconstruction the counsellor draws Betty’s attention to the fact that she is more bothered by morals than her sister, although her sister has now finished a university degree. This can be seen in the first two recollections. Her difficult relationships with men are linked to the early recollection titled *Betrayal* and possibly also with the early recollection titled *Powerful man abuses his position*. These micro-stories reflect an honest, ambitious and anxious person who has a hard time trusting men and feels that people close to her have betrayed her. The Icelandic version of the Career Adaptability Scale was administered to Betty and is shown in table 3.

| | Concern | Control | Curiosity | Confidence | Co-operation | Contribution | Total |
|--------------|---------------|------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| CAAS-I T1 | 3.34 (29%) | 2 (2%) | 3.5 (49%) | 3 (12%) | 3 (7%) | 3.6 (20%) | 2.17% (0%) |
| CAAS-I T2 | 4.5 (91%) | 3 (18%) | 3.34 (34%) | 3.34 (17%) | 4.14 (42%) | 3.8 (27%) | 3.7 (37%) |

Figure 4. Betty’s results on CAAS-I, before and after CCI sessions (% percentile rank in the national comparison group)

The analysis of the two cases on CAAS-I shows that Eva is progressing in her life, has set the goal of finishing upper secondary studies and is confident that her life will improve. She scores much higher than Betty on CAAS-I, especially on the control, curiosity and confidence sub-scales. The effectiveness of the CCI intervention is also evident from the fact that she progresses on all subscales of the CAAS-I, before and after the two sessions. Betty scores exceptionally low on all subscales, even though

she shows a high score on the concern scale after the two sessions. Interestingly, she digresses on the curiosity sub-scale.

The narrative in the two cases is also analysed with a literary analysis (see Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2018). It shows that there is progression in Eva's story, but not in the story of Betty. She is stuck and unable to extract herself from the cycle of fear, betrayal and blame.

5. Discussion and implications for career counselling

The counselling profession is at a turning point, according to Blustein (2011). Either we continue working with middle class clients or we expand our services to include people from lower classes. This expansion is already taking place in adult guidance services in European countries where life-long learning (LLL) and life-long guidance (LLG) are provided (Barnes et al., 2020). The question remains whether counsellors need to adapt to new contexts and change their counselling methods.

This paper suggests that we look to theories and research with sociological emphasis and examine how they can provide us with instruments of investigation in career counselling. I will discuss here how each concept can be of help in the case of Betty, a client who has great difficulties in progressing in her career, in fact she is stuck and doesn't go anywhere despite the assistance she is getting in the Career Construction Interview.

Symbolic violence

The life, suffering and careers of people in the lower classes do not catch the attention of the middle classes. Counsellors are blind to the needs of the poor and unemployed (Blustein, 2006) and in general we are blind to social injustices and consider them natural (Bourdieu, 1998). Counsellors must "see" their clients and their contexts and improve their knowledge of the situation they are in (Blustein, 2011).

Betty is self-blaming and in a low position in her environment. The counsellor must avoid feeling he or she is in a superior social position and be reflective about the desire to judge Betty. The pitfall that must be avoided is the perception that intolerable conditions of living are acceptable or natural (Bourdieu, 1998). Another aspect of symbolic violence in the story of Betty is the idea that men are always superior to women. This is reflected in her relationship with the father and her lawyer and of course in the relationship with the abusive husband.

Socio-analysis

Power relations are being analysed in socio-analysis, both between genders and social classes. The aim is to modify these relations and gain knowledge of one's position in the power structure.

The counsellor would first instruct Betty about key concepts in Bourdieu's theory and then continue to analyse forces of domination in her life. Are there parallels with her favourite story of Korca? Why does she always seek the approval of men, and how is this attitude reinforced by societal norms? The counsellor would also explore with Betty whether she is pursuing her own interests or those of others, i.e. her sisters. Is she blinded to these injustices? (Swartz, 1997).

The counsellor and Betty could also explore moments in her life, when she stood up for herself, such as deciding to take good care of her child at the age of 17 and later going into custody battle. They would also discuss her ambitious career goal, and whether it could be approached in well-defined steps. The aim here is to diminish the weight of social conditions by becoming aware of the social forces at play, understand them and act on them (Vilhjálmsdóttir & Arnkelsson, 2013). The awareness of the social aspects of her situation, such as the lack of financial support from society for single mothers, will strengthen her by relieving her of the self-recriminations she is struggling with and give her more energy to change her predicament.

Habitus

Habitus is defined as a social subjectivity, which means that our social position is intrinsic to our thinking and bodies. From our social position we distinguish between different things. For example, an academic might find it difficult to distinguish and understand the interest of sub proletarian youngsters in street fights. His or her habitus is not sensitized or mobilised to perceive these interests or pursue them (Bourdieu, 1983 in Wacquant, 1992).

Betty finds herself in another habitus group than her sisters and father, who are university educated, and the comparison pains her. She wants to finish a master's degree in business. Everyone is telling her that her educational goals are too ambitious, but from the viewpoint of social suffering, this is vital to her. The counsellor can explore her habitus, especially the music she listens as those variables have proven to distinguish people into different habitus group. Where does Betty position herself and people in her environment? It is also of interest to know that people can change their habitus (i.e. someone in a fashion and pop group can move to a literature group).

Another practical use of habitus is to replace the second question in the CCI on favourite magazines or TV programs with a question about music and musicians.

My research on gendered habitus showed that girls are interested in occupations that they find prestigious, whereas boys are interested in occupations that give high income. Betty is a good example; she is first and foremost thinking of the prestige of the successful businesswoman and is therefore interested in that profession. She is in a low social position, because she has not succeeded in her studies like her sisters. In the counselling session the counsellor should acknowledge Betty's need for prestige in planning her career.

Aspirations

It might be surprising to the counsellor that Betty aspires to obtain a master's degree in business, since she will need at least 7 years full time studies to reach that goal. Research results show that 66% of youth in Betty's position aspire to university studies if obstacles were removed (Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2021). Counsellors must remember that low class youth encounter all kinds of hindrances on their educational paths, that middle class students are less likely to encounter.

Decent work

Betty complains about being in indecent work, something that is also reflected in a study on low-skilled youth where women find that their work is indecent, compared with men (Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2021). This can be connected to results that reveal that women find interesting occupations that they find prestigious (Vilhjálmsdóttir & Arnkelsson, 2007).

6. Final thoughts

As a conclusion to this paper, I would like to remember words of my Ph. D. supervisor, the late John Killeen (1996), who wrote that good evaluation shows us the value of the intervention. Betty and Eva are low-skilled individuals, who would like to improve their situation, but have to surmount obstacles in order to do so, many of which have to do with their low socio-economic status as single mothers with little income. Both have sought the help of a counsellor. For Eva, the intervention was of value and strengthened her in her career goals. But Betty was not gaining much from the intervention. The question is whether Betty's problems are so big, that our intervention is not doing much for her or is our intervention not adapted to her situation and blind to important aspects of her story, which have to do with the social forces that keep her down. I favour the latter hypothesis, and I hope I have convinced the reader that sociological theories and research should be mobilized in order to help individuals to free themselves from the constraints of social determination.

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