



# Career counsellors' professional agency when working with migrants

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## Abstract

This article analyses the professional agency of counsellors working with migrants. Using Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing, our thematic analysis draws on interviews with career counsellors from both Finland and Sweden. The results highlight a need for counsellors to recognise the differences in situations of students with migrant backgrounds and their native peers and adjust their counselling accordingly. They also indicate that counsellors struggle with implementation of the core of their professional agency as a result of societal domination of the counselling agenda and indicate a need for more collective, society-level challenging of this agenda.

**Keywords** Migration · Professional agency · Career counselling

## Résumé

**L'agentivité professionnelle des conseillerères en orientation scolaire et professionnelle lorsqu'ils/elles travaillent avec des migrantes** Cet article analyse l'agentivité professionnelle des conseiller-ère-s en orientation scolaire et professionnelle travaillant avec des migrant-e-s. En utilisant les concepts de classification et de cadrage de Bernstein, notre analyse thématique s'appuie sur des entretiens avec des conseiller-ère-s en orientation scolaire et professionnelle de Finlande et de Suède. Les résultats soulignent la nécessité pour les conseiller-ère-s de reconnaître les différences de situations/conditions de vie entre les étudiant-e-s issu-e-s de l'immigration et leurs pairs natifs et d'adapter leurs conseils en conséquence. Ils indiquent également que les conseiller-ère-s ont du mal à mettre en œuvre le cœur de leur agentivité professionnelle en raison de la domination sociétale de l'agenda de l'orientation, et soulignent la nécessité d'une remise en question plus collective, au niveau de la société, de cet agenda.

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## Zusammenfassung

**Berufliches Handeln von Laufbahnberatenden in der Arbeit mit Migranten** In diesem Artikel wird das berufliche Handeln von Beratenden, die mit Migranten arbeiten, analysiert. Auf der Grundlage von Bernsteins Konzepten der Klassifizierung und des Framings stützt sich unsere thematische Inhaltsanalyse auf Interviews mit Laufbahnberatenden aus Finnland und Schweden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Beratungspersonen die Unterschiede zwischen den Situationen von Studierenden mit Migrationshintergrund und ihren einheimischen Mitschüler\*innen erkennen und ihre Beratung entsprechend anpassen müssen. Sie deuten auch darauf hin, dass Beratungspersonen mit der Umsetzung des Kerns ihres professionellen Handelns infolge der gesellschaftlichen Dominanz der Beratungsagenda zu kämpfen haben, und weisen auf die Notwendigkeit hin, diese Agenda auf kollektiver, gesellschaftlicher Ebene stärker in Frage zu stellen.

## Resumen

**La agencia profesional de los orientadores profesionales cuando trabajan con migrantes** Este artículo analiza la agencia profesional de los asesores que trabajan con inmigrantes. Utilizando los conceptos de clasificación y encuadre de Bernstein, nuestro análisis temático se basa en entrevistas con orientadores profesionales de Finlandia y Suecia. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto la necesidad de que los orientadores reconozcan las diferencias en las situaciones de los estudiantes de origen inmigrante y sus compañeros nativos y ajusten su asesoramiento en consecuencia. También indican que los asesores luchan con la implementación del núcleo de su agencia profesional como resultado de la dominación social de la agenda de asesoramiento, e indican la necesidad de un desafío más colectivo, a nivel de la sociedad, de esta agenda.

## Introduction

In this article we address career counsellors' professional agency when working with migrants in educational settings using empirical data obtained in interviews with counsellors in Finland and Sweden. These Nordic societies share a long common history and have similar educational and labour market structures. However, there is a substantial difference in the numbers of migrants. For example, in 2020 they accounted for 8 and 26% of the total population in Finland (Statistics Finland, n.d.) and Sweden (Statistics Sweden, n.d.), respectively. There is also a difference in the size of migration flows to the two countries. For example, 24 100 non-national migrants moved to Finland and 97 800 to Sweden in 2019 (Eurostat, 2021). The two countries have also had different political approaches with regard to migration, with Sweden having been more liberal and Finland more reserved in their policies, but they have recently moved towards a more similar stance (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2014; Keskinen et al., 2019). In both countries, integration is seen as a question linked to employment and labour markets (Ali et al., 2018; Ministry of the Interior, Finland, 2021; Government Offices of Sweden, n.d.). The career counsellors of the two

countries share similar challenges in relation to migration, particularly in identifying and implementing effective ways to support the inclusion of migrants (Sundelin, 2015). Other similarities in the two contexts are challenges in relating to migrant students, who may substantially differ from the ‘ideal client’ that forms an important starting point of both a career counsellor’s training and theories applied in career counselling (Hooley et al., 2019).

The features of successful integration of a migrant have recently been discussed in many European countries (Duszczek et al., 2020; Inglis et al., 2020; Mügge & Van der Haar, 2016). The very concept of integration has been criticised as neo-colonial practise, wrongly targeting individuals rather than societies and focusing on groups considered problematic (Schinkel, 2018). It has also been regarded as counterproductive and having conflicting goals (Waal, 2021) because it creates barriers for participation and inclusion for newcomers (who will probably settle permanently) and generates hierarchical differences in status between immigrant and native-born citizens. Moreover, due to the growing complexity, acceleration of changes, and increased interconnectedness across societies as well as diversification of migrants, a need to reconsider the concept of integration has been recognised (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018). In Europe, especially, this has led to integration being oriented towards assimilation (fostering whole-hearted embracement of the host culture) and associated rejection of a putatively ‘failed multiculturalism’ (Schinkel, 2018). This clearly differs from simple incorporation (Inglis et al., 2020), e.g. structural incorporation through labour market access and educational attainment in the host society, with deeper consideration of the relationship between migrants and other members of the society.

A challenge of integration related to career counselling (hereafter counselling) in Finland and Sweden is that cultural perspectives and lived experiences from the Global South are brought into the counselling context. In stark contrast, the mainstream career theories used by the career counsellors (hereafter counsellors) are developed in the Global North and may not consider issues of the Global South (Ribeiro, 2021), as they aim to homogenise the world by ignoring cultural differences in the counselling context (Silva et al., 2016). Moreover, even speaking of the Global South as a single entity essentially homogenises the massive diversity of Southern perspectives (Moosavi, 2020). Thus, counsellors face new situations and challenges when aiming to support migrants, as their practices (which form part of a larger societal structure) are heavily oriented towards the ideal (native) client (Sultana, 2022). The challenges include needs to respond to career issues related to employability and mobility that arise from the reasons for migration; combining the necessities of regulation with the aim of emancipation (Silva et al., 2016); and resisting the coloniality of both knowledge and being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

In this article *professional agency* refers to the counsellors’ space for action and their power to affect matters, make decisions, and take stances (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen, 2015). In their professional interactions with migrants this is manifested through their relations to the structures their students encounter during the integration process and the work practices the counsellors implement. The aim of this article is to increase knowledge about how providing counselling for students

with a migrant background affects counsellors' professional agency and to analyse the implications for counselling practices with migrants.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. The next section presents the context of counselling in relation to social justice and employability and relevant research. Then we define our conceptual framework and the methodological approach applied. Finally, we present our results and a discussion based upon them.

## The context of counselling

Counselling can be described as a process based on cooperative and dialogic interaction between counsellors and their counsees (Vehviläinen, 2014) through which individuals are encouraged, supported, and guided to think about and act in their lives (Hooley et al., 2018). It can also be seen as a space where the processes influencing people's lives can be investigated (Vehviläinen & Souto, 2021). Currently, the meaning of 'career' is being redefined as a result of both the changing world and the concept having been added to policy documents and ethical declarations without being clearly defined. The lack of clarity related to the 'career' concept may render counselling an impossible task (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2014), as the focus of the counselling also remains unclear. Furthermore, professionalism in the field of counselling needs more attention to clarify its characteristics in terms, for instance, who works in counselling, what the work consists of, how they work, and for whom they work (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2014). There is also a prevalent notion of *ideal counselling* in the profession, referring to the currently dominant holistic life-design counselling approach (Rossier et al., 2021), which includes consideration of the entire life sphere of the counselee.

Several authors have argued that counselling can contribute to social justice and promote experiences of well-being, belonging, and autonomy, often with inclusive ambitions (Hertzberg & Sundelin, 2014; Sultana, 2014) and hence the process of integration. In socially just counselling, concepts such as lifelong learning and employability are questioned (Hooley et al., 2018), and counsellors adopt a facilitating role in the clients' integration processes (Magnano et al., 2021). Socially just counselling recognises the costs of an individual's geographical, social, and professional identity as well as sacrifices linked to career mobility. Expectations of career mobility affect an individual's opportunities and access to security, as well as the satisfaction that can come from being part of a family, inclusion in a society, and feeling a sense of belonging to a place (Hooley et al., 2018). A counsellor could apply a systemic, context-centred approach to reduce the barriers people face during integration into the labour market and the social spheres of their new home countries (Udayar et al., 2021). Counselling implemented according to a critical lifelong paradigm can provide a form of collective support, but it can also reinforce individualization and the treatment of structural problems as personal problems if the paradigm's critical element is lost (Sultana, 2011).

Employability issues related to integration have been discussed from several perspectives. Some researchers have pointed out that these involve conflicting expectations

and discourses: migrants should assume individual responsibility for their personal integration, whilst simultaneously being forced into positions of passive recipients or problematic cases (Kusterer & Bernhard-Oettel, 2020; Lønsmann, 2020). There is also a specific dynamism related to migrant employability, as people must first be labelled as excluded before being allowed to be included ‘correctly’ in their new society as employed citizens (Vesterberg, 2016). Rooney and Rawlinson (2016) argue that the focus on employability issues shifts the discussion from social justice to meritocracy and that this is informed by the human capital theory. In the context of migration, the skills and competences of migrants can also be seen from another perspective, as new forms of migrant-specific capital derived from their own contexts (Thondhlana et al., 2016; Yosso, 2005).

Research in this field has mainly focused on structural issues, showing how integration measures reinforce the marginalisation of migrants and assist in creating segregation (Kurki, 2018) or construct employable subjects (Masoud et al., 2020), or on the migrants themselves, discussing how young migrants experience the importance of language proficiency and higher education to enter the society (Sharif, 2017) or how migrants aiming for accreditation of their teacher qualification find themselves in a marginal labour market position (Ennerberg, 2021). However, the counsellors’ work has received less attention. There is research showing that counsellors sometimes advise against career choices based on students’ interests (Bjuhr, 2019), direct students towards occupations and branches with labour shortages (Fejes et al., 2018; Linde et al., 2021), use evasive counselling (Souto, 2020), or limit the counselling topics according to their own agendas (Kekki, 2022). The purpose of counselling may then appear to be an educational, disciplinary strategy that primarily serves the needs of the market and is performed more on behalf of the society than the individual (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2014). Thus, counsellors face conflicting demands to help students adapt to societal structures or their personal development and empowerment. Individuals are pressured to enter the labour market, and counsellors are pressured to support this transition, particularly (but not solely) in times of economic recession (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012). If individuals are to make choices for themselves and not have their career decided by market forces, support is needed for their liberation processes, and they need to be equipped with critical awareness (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012). Development of critical awareness of social inclusion is also essential when dealing with questions of integration within counselling (Magnano et al., 2021). Therefore, we aim here to enhance knowledge of counsellors’ work with migrants in the light of the need for such critical awareness and how their practices and professional agency are influenced by the context in which they work and their counselees’ contexts.

## Conceptual framework

In our analysis we draw on Bernstein’s educational sociology, which enables us to complement the research field on counselling with a perspective that takes context and structure into account. According to Bernstein’s theoretical framework, structures can both constrain and enable and carry the potential for change, thereby enabling agency (Bernstein, 2000; Best, 2007). Applying Bernstein’s analysis of

pedagogical discourse, in this article we address counselling discourses. Here, discourse refers to the Bernsteinian understanding of a discourse as a system that constructs and regulates practices through agencies, such as an educational institution. Since this article examines professional agency in counselling within educational structures and the context of migration, we use the concepts of *classification* and *framing* (Bernstein, 2000) to analyse our empirical material. This provides a systemic perspective, enabling the analysis to cover relevant aspects of the profession of counselling and influential factors of the structure that the profession is embedded in.

The classification concept provides symbolic boundaries for the counselling discourse, whilst the framing concept provides its form of realisation (Bernstein, 2000). We have used the concepts to analyse the practice of counselling rather than other educational practices. To our knowledge, they have not been used for this purpose in previous research. Strong classification refers to a counselling practice that is specialised and well differentiated in relation to other practices, such as other topics taught in a focal educational institution, or services provided by other agencies, such as the employment administration. When classification is strong, it is characterised by hierarchy and the counselling discourse is reproduced. In the context of this article, reproduction of the counselling discourse can be understood as maintenance and implementation of an ideal counselling or other counselling approach acknowledged by the organisation. Thus, in cases of strong classification, the counsellor's professional agency could be strengthened by acting according to the structure, but in the opposite case their agency would be weakened. A counselling practice classified as strong is not open to public discussion or external challenge. When classification is strong, the counselling practice must be isolated from other practices and activities, whereas with weak classification they must be brought together (Bernstein, 2000).

Where there is weak classification, counselling practices are more cross-disciplinary and not as established as in cases with strong classification. Furthermore, influential communication from the outside is less controlled, and the practice is more sensitive to external influences (Bernstein, 2000). The counsellors' professional agency is affected by the external influences and could be either enabled or constrained thereby. However, weak classification also provides "possibilities for transformation" (Atkinson et al., 1997, p. 121), as the professional boundaries are weaker and more flexible. In the context of our study, this would mean that the counselling is not strongly distinguished from other activities or disciplines within the educational institution: the counselling responsibilities may be shared with other employees or the professional boundaries of the counsellors' work may be unclear even for themselves.

The framing concept is related to the regulation and legitimization of communication in counselling: who controls what (for example) related to communication, sequencing, pacing, criteria, and control over the social foundation, which enables the transition of the counselling content. When the framing is strong, the counsellor has control over these aspects, but if it is weak, the control is shared with or influenced by the counselee. Thus, the framing regulates the social order and hierarchy of the counselling relation (Bernstein, 2000). In our context, framing can be understood as the negotiations over the practical implementation of the counselling: the

principles applied, who gets to define its contents, its pace, and how much time it may consume.

## Methodology

### Participants

In this article we are not comparing the two national contexts, but rather using them to obtain complementary insights into the counselling of migrants, as they involve different age groups and working environments, providing a counselling continuum from teenagers/young adults to adults. The Swedish dataset consists of semi-structured interviews with six counsellors working in a language introduction programme in upper secondary schools: two in rural areas, two in smaller cities, and two in commuting municipalities close to larger cities. The Finnish dataset includes semi-structured interviews with four counsellors working in an integration training programme for adult migrants, all located in urban municipalities in Southern Finland.

In both countries, the interviewed counsellors were working with migrants from various parts of the world. In the Swedish context, the migrants were teenagers or young adults, and their families represent equally various educational and employment backgrounds. In the Finnish context, where the migrants were adults, their education ranged from no formal education to a completion of a higher education degree and their employment ranged from no work history to highly skilled work. In both national contexts the migrants or their families were ‘regular’ (forced, labour, or economic) migrants (IOM, n.d.).

All municipalities in Sweden must offer a language introduction programme to provide education to 16–19-year-old migrant students who lack sufficient merits to start an upper secondary programme. The programme is delivered by upper secondary schools and focuses on the Swedish language to enable students transitioning to a national upper secondary school programme or other form of education or employment (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012). The Swedish Education Act (SFS, 2010) requires a counsellor to be adequately educated for such work. The individual competencies and experiences of a counsellor depend on when they completed their education. The duties of counsellors are defined nationally through both the curriculum for upper secondary school and general advice from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011, 2013).

In Finland, migrants who are registered as unemployed jobseekers are required to attend a national integration training programme. This concerns foreign nationals who have a valid residence permit to live in Finland and had the right to enter the country to find work and become employed (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, Finland 2010, 2012). According to legislation, the aim of integration is “to provide immigrants with the knowledge and skills required in the society and working life and to provide them with support” (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, Finland, 2012, Sect. 3). The programme’s implementation is organised by public and private educational institutions, which are selected regionally through a tendering process. The main subjects taught in the training programme are the Finnish language and civic skills,



including information on educational opportunities, job-seeking, and entrepreneurship. The civic skills portion also involves work try-out periods and counselling, which are the responsibility of the counsellors. The counselling includes face-to-face discussions between the counsellors and students, focusing mainly on students' educational and employment choices but also on topical personal issues relevant to students. There are no formal, national-level requirements for the qualifications or educational background of the counsellors, so there are substantial variations in their individual competencies and experiences both generally and specifically for working with migrants. Their duties are defined on the local level by the programme providers in a counselling plan (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, Finland, 2010; Finnish National Board of Education, 2012).

### Procedure and measure

The interviews were conducted and transcribed individually in two projects during 2018–2019. In the Swedish dataset, the interviews included questions about the counselling of their students, local educational structures, educational support provided for the students, and various transitions within school and working life. In the Finnish dataset, the interviews included questions about the counselling of the students, educational and employment support provided for them, and the counsellors' work within the employment administration system.

### Data analysis

The Finnish and Swedish interviewees' responses were initially coded and translated to English by Authors 1 and 2, respectively. After this, we started working jointly and applied reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) to identify points in the interviews where the counsellors made references to either employment or educational plans or to the counselling process between themselves and the students. After coding these points, we formulated themes to summarise our findings and looked for patterns of shared meanings in them, by examining the themes and analysing their relations to the counselling practices they encompassed. In the last stage of the analysis, we applied Bernstein's theoretical concepts to study the counsellors' professional agency. We developed reflexive interpretations of the material using our subjective viewpoints and experiences to interpret the data. This included examining the translated excerpts together from our initial coding. The text production was conducted jointly in online work-along sessions and real time co-authoring through collaborative document editing.

### Results

In this section we present the results of our analysis. We start by describing the counselling conditions and factors influencing the counsellors' professional agency identified in our data. We then examine their implications for practice in



relation to the counselling's connections with the societal needs and aspirations of the migrants and the concept of an ideal migrant student for counselling.

## Factors identifying career counsellors' professional agency

In the analysis of the data, we identified several factors influencing the counsellors' space for action. One was what the counsellors described as their students' need to acquire basic knowledge about the school system and labour market, as well as other local or national information needed to make career plans. This fundamental requirement of migrant students for societal orientation may hinder their transitions and thus must be considered by the counsellors before more elaborate counselling is attempted. In this manner, the professional agency of the counsellors is strongly affected by the students' starting points.

To engage in such counselling as you might want, with motivational interviewing and [focusing on] "What do you want to be when you grow up?", it doesn't work like that here. It is not possible to say that I have a counselling process, this is how it is for my students. (Counsellor F, Sweden)

Counselling of the newly arrived students was described as requiring adaptation to the students' language skills and contextual knowledge. Thus, the counselling practice can be characterised as having weak classification since external and often practical issues had to be prioritised before the students were receptive to what the counsellors would consider ideal counselling in a different setting with native students.

Another factor, either enabling or constraining the counsellors' professional agency, is relational, the perceived need to build a good working relationship with the students. In order for the counsellors' to have any professional agency, they must acquire a mandate to guide and implement counselling in their students' personal lives. Thus, gaining the students' trust is important for enabling the counsellors' professional agency. Beyond societal orientation, the counsellors described their students as needing an ally when facing the new-country context. One counsellor described how they communicate with students during a work try-out period as follows:

No one calls me at night, but I always tell them that during those three weeks, I won't be sleeping, I'll just be waiting to see how they're doing, and I'll be thinking of them morning, noon, and night. Well, of course I don't have time for that, but somehow, I manage to create a confidential relationship with the students, so they trust that I'll be there for them. (Counsellor 4, Finland)

This quotation clearly shows that the counsellor's ambitions included provision of counselling based on the students' terms and implemented through being both trustworthy and available. Thus, it represents a weak framing, as the counsellor invited counselled students to co-control the shared communication, sequencing, and

social ground. This is also a case of strong classification: the counselling took place according to a set structure and the counsellor's role was clearly defined for everyone involved.

Issues related to the focus of the counselling were also found to influence the counsellors' professional agency. The counsellors questioned whether it was enough to provide the students with only the relevant information about a certain profession or if they should play a more dominant role in the decision-making. Another ambition of the counsellors we identified was to support their students in making informed choices in their career planning and decision-making, by providing the migrant students with access to required information about different options. The following quotation exemplifies a discussion about a website aiming to provide Finnish jobseekers with detailed information about different professions and its variable utility for the students:

Well, it doesn't work for everyone. It helps in some cases, but very often it doesn't. So, that's the difficulty, that I don't then know. Well, right now I'm thinking that quite often, for instance assistant nurse is the profession for many, then, okay: they're thinking they want to be an assistant nurse, so what's the counsellor's role there then? Like, is there any point sorting it out further if that's what they want? (Counsellor 1, Finland)

This quotation illustrates the challenges of counselling and raises questions about the optimal kind of agency for counsellors. The situation can be interpreted as one variation of weak classification: the professional role of the counsellor is unclear and sensitive to external influences, such as the time available for counselling a student.

## Career counselling serving the needs of a society

Although the participants counselled students of different ages and at different points in their lives, the expectations and needs of society were closely connected with the counselling they were receiving. This was manifested in the counsellors' focus on employable educational paths and their encouragement of the students to prioritise employment. From this perspective, the students seemed to be expected to fill a gap in the labour market, and the counselling was a tool to bridge that gap.

So, the work of counselling appears to be at an intersection between duties related to society and its structures and the students, thereby creating a professional dilemma for the counsellors. Policies prioritising employability may affect their professional agency and lead to pressure on them to adopt a more directive or dominating approach when discussing the local labour market situation with students.

The Swedish Public Employment Service has published a forecast of what things will be like within the next 10 years, including predictions that jobs will be mainly in technology, construction, and healthcare. There's a need for labour, but there's a mismatch between what young people want to apply for and what they do apply for. There is work, but maybe not everyone wants that kind of work. (Counsellor A, Sweden)

The counsellors were aware that there might be differences between the needs of the labour market and the students' interests or wishes. The counsellors' struggle with this dilemma could result in compromises, for example, suggesting more feasible alternatives that are close to a student's interests or wishes, if their expressed wishes do not seem sufficiently attainable. From a societal perspective, this represents strong classification: the counselling has a clear task in relation to the labour market. From the counsellor's perspective, however, this may indicate weak classification: the possibilities for carrying out the task may be less clear, as they are affected by external circumstances and expectations.

In the interviews, the counsellors commented on the students' opportunities to become employed and plan careers in their new context. They were aware of the employability values of different jobs and relied on their own experiences when considering which options were worth taking.

The question is whether there are a lot of jobs in a sector or whether it is realistic, [...] if you want to be a cook, it's a good profession: everybody eats. It's a good profession because you have a very good chance of getting employment. But if someone wants to be a pilot, I think to myself that you won't be a pilot, but if you do, please call me. I don't mind being wrong. (Counsellor 2, Finland)

This quotation illustrates what prioritising employment means in concrete terms for counselling: societal expectations constrain counsellors' professional agency in ways that result in the counsellors putting more effort into guiding students towards certain jobs. This indicates strong classification, as the counselling seems to follow societal values. Simultaneously, from the perspective of ideal, more holistic counselling, this can be seen as weak classification: the practice is grounded in external influences instead of a holistic approach. The counsellors seem to be implementing strong framing by assuming control over 'good' career choices and sharing information about them. At the same time, this strong framing is challenged by the students' initiatives of choosing careers that are not recommended by the counsellors.

The counsellors expressed a discrepancy between their own and the students' perspectives of time with regard to making choices: the students' perspectives tended to be short term, whereas the counsellors emphasised the importance of making long-term plans and accepting that there are seldom shortcuts to achieving career goals.

I try to say, "Wait another year; when you go to upper secondary school, you should have competitive grades. If you get in there too fast and get low grades, you can't compete with them. You must be very clear that you don't have to be in such a hurry now". (Counsellor B, Sweden)

This counsellor's concern for the students is apparent through their use of in-depth knowledge about the school system and the labour market: they utilised their professional agency to affect the outcome, so the students could avoid potential pitfalls. This quotation also shows that the counsellor was practising strong framing by taking control of the communication.

## Counsellors' professional agency in relation to their students

We also found variation in the way that the counsellors worked with students who were trying to establish themselves in a new society. A strong portrait of an 'ideal migrant student' emerged in the interviews, with the counsellors sketching images of 'good students' and 'good migrants'. The counsellors described the ideal student as flexible in various ways and appreciative of the importance of the formal education acquired in the new home country. The ideal student was also described as quick to learn the language and develop personal skills and competencies that are essential for employment and well-being. Thus, the ideal students are those with whom the counsellors can relax and to whom they can relate. These students need less support than the others and do not necessarily raise any difficult issues in counselling encounters. In addition, this kind of student seems to represent less of a professional burden, as they are independent, take initiative, and have many assets that society and the labour market appreciate.

But in a way, I trust this [kind of] student because he is really energetic. He hasn't needed an interpreter for many years and takes responsibility for his life. Although he still lacks writing skills, his attitude compensates a lot so...he's like someone who strives to go forward and is capable of finding the answers. (Counsellor 3, Finland)

A counterpart that was not explicitly stated but can be inferred is an unenergetic, complacent, and unresourceful student. This illustrates how the counsellors' professional agency is affected by their assessments of their students' characteristics. The counsellors also seem to project the successes and failures of previous students upon the present students. In other words, it would seem that the students are not met as individuals, but rather as generalised representatives of certain varieties of student. The quotation also illustrates that the way the counsellors view students influences the framing: the 'good' students allow the counsellors to choose either strong or weak framing, depending on the situation, whereas they are obliged to adopt strong framing when professionally interacting with less ideal students.

The structures the students relate to in their new context can also enable or restrain the counsellors' professional agency. The counsellors who participated in our study strove to contribute to a sustainable career plan for their students, often considering teachers' or employers' assessments of the students.

I also try to make it easy for them. Now, you can't be accepted into the Natural Science Programme [needed to become a doctor]. You're now 18 years old. Now you've missed the opportunity to apply. Now this year is the last year for you to apply to upper secondary school. And then I say, with nursing education, you can also become a doctor later. (Counsellor D, Sweden)

This quotation exemplifies the counsellors' wishes for the students to achieve their educational ambitions. However, the counsellors seem to simultaneously use their professional agency to position themselves as gatekeepers in the counselling conversation, applying a strong framing, and creating a strong classification where, through

the normative view of pacing, their practice is reproductive. Such positioning of a counsellor may hinder students' access to counselling towards higher ambitions and freedom of choice and prevent them from taking a chance (or risk) or testing the extent of their skills and/or energy.

## Discussion

The counsellors in our study related their professional agency to society's complex structures and regulations regarding migrants. In addition, both the organisations hosting the counselling and the students themselves were found to influence the strength of the classification and framing of counselling practices. This position seems to challenge counsellors' professional identity, as many were questioning what it means to be a counsellor and how to carry out their profession, in accordance with previous findings (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2014). This also calls for more conscious emphasis on the relevance of ethical self-reflection in relation to migration issues.

Since the migrants are counselled within the structure of a society, the authorities and organisations that provide the counselling and counselling training programmes contribute to the discourse that characterises the counselling practices. However, the dominant approach of authorities and organisations, which is more focused on filling gaps in the labour market, differs from the approach of the counselling training programmes, which is focused on carrying out ideal, holistic counselling. This domination results in the practice working on behalf of society more than individuals (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2014) and seems to align with the idea that integration should involve migrants adjusting to the society rather than vice versa. In this process the society is seen as a coherent entity with well-defined boundaries that has reached its ultimate developmental goal (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018). This situation also directs counsellors to emphasise societal aspects in their practices. The counsellors in our study did not seem to adopt a clear socially just counselling approach, as they were not questioning the students' employability or the importance thereof. On the contrary, employment and employability were underlined by the counsellors as desirable and important outcomes. Their ethical reflections as they considered appropriate approaches to their students' situations seem to reveal awareness of social justice issues, but their professional agency was directed elsewhere or restricted by the societal or organisational needs influencing their work.

## Research implications

Our data show evidence of both strong and weak classification in the counsellors' professional encounters with migrant students. As stated above, the counsellors' professional agency can be strengthened through strong classification, in cases where the meaning and idea of counselling are clear for the student, the counsellor, and the organisation. In cases of strong classification professional agency can be described as solid but potentially slow to adapt to changing circumstances. It may

also protect the counsellors' professional identity by establishing and maintaining definite boundaries. In contrast, weak classification indicates a lack of clear professional boundaries, and in such situations, counsellors need to take a more active position to define boundaries. This may render the professional agency more resilient and resourceful when responding to or initiating changes.

Similarly, we found signs of both strong and weak framing. Framing affects counsellors' opportunities to share social foundation with students. In cases of weak framing, students are more likely to challenge the counsellor's decisions and solutions. As situations of students with migrant backgrounds may not be normative, this also affects the reproduction of the counselling discourse. In weak framing, the professional agency would seem more fluid and be responsive to issues presented during counselling, which is less likely in counselling with strong framing.

Our data show how the professional agency of counsellors is shaped by the ideal student. As shown in previous research, at the core of this ideal is a strong emphasis on equating integration with employability (Masoud et al., 2020) and placing responsibility on individuals to create their own employment opportunities (Lønsmann, 2020) to the extent that the migrants have a duty to become employable (Dahlstedt & Vesterberg, 2017). By acting independently and according to normative expectations, the ideal student helps counsellors define themselves in a narrower sense, allowing them to stay within the core zone of their professionalism. In contrast, the not-so-ideal students strengthen the framing of the counselling practice, allowing counsellors to take control and legitimising the counsellor as the leader of the practice. The counsellor is in charge of both the procedures and prerequisites of the counselling when the framing is strong.

## Practical implications

Our findings clearly indicate that counsellors' professional agency is delimited by the context of migration when examined through the concepts of classification and framing: counsellors must take account of the situations of students with migrant backgrounds and recognise that they differ from those of native students.

The relationship or working alliance (Vehviläinen & Souto, 2021) seems even more crucial between counsellors and students with migrant backgrounds than in other contexts, as it creates foundations for the common ground that is essential for counselling. However, our data indicate that counsellors may emphasise the employability agenda rather than respond holistically to students' situations. This could be interpreted as a conscious choice by the counsellors to help students within the framework defined by their context-dependent professional boundaries. It can also be seen as an emphasis on prioritising the functional more than the social aspects of integration (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018) or as an attempt to ensure the migrants' compatibility with the societal expectations (Waal, 2021).

As stated in previous studies (Bjuhr, 2019; Fejes et al., 2018; Linde et al., 2021; Souto, 2020), the career choices considered suitable for migrants are often raised in counselling encounters, and counsellors seem to emphasise certain vocational training paths connected to needs of the labour market. We found that focusing on these

needs constrained the counsellors and created situations where they had to try to be able to act differently. Since counselling is defined as a societal practice (Vehviläinen & Souto, 2021) as well as a potential source of social justice and inclusive ambitions (Hertzberg & Sundelin, 2014; Hooley et al., 2018; Sultana, 2014), the counsellors need to resolve how to react to the tension resulting from counselling being situated between society and the individual. Our data indicate that the counsellors' attention was divided between various interests. They seemed uncertain of the core of their profession and its elements. Furthermore, the professional boundaries within or outside their employment organisations may be blurry, making their professional agency both vulnerable and flexible.

## Conclusion

Examination of the counsellors' professional agency in terms of classification and framing enables distinction of two levels of agency: societal and practical. The counselling is defined by a Bernsteinian dualism of enablement and constraint: the counsellors enable the students' integration process by providing them with resources, but also constrain them by following the dominant agenda, wherein the students are expected to fill gaps in the labour market rather than find career paths that interest them.

If the counselling of migrants were socially just and reflected the principles of holistic counselling, the counsellors' professional agency would include challenging the dominant agenda on these two levels. However, this requires collective social-level consideration of the nature of integration and clarification of how it can be supported by counselling.

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**Data availability** The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to preserving individuals' privacy under the European General Data Protection Regulation.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no competing interests. The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

**Ethical approval** All the persons involved in this research volunteered to participate and provided their written consent. For the Finnish data, the ethical principles defined by the Finnish National Board of



Research Integrity (2019) were followed. No ethical review was conducted, as there are no research design elements that would require it. The Swedish data derive from the research project “Moving on, Youth attending an introduction programme and their career support in varying local contexts” which was subjected to an ethical review which was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Umeå (Ref. No. 2018/173:31). Further, the ethical guidelines from the Swedish Research Council (2017) were also followed in the data collection.

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