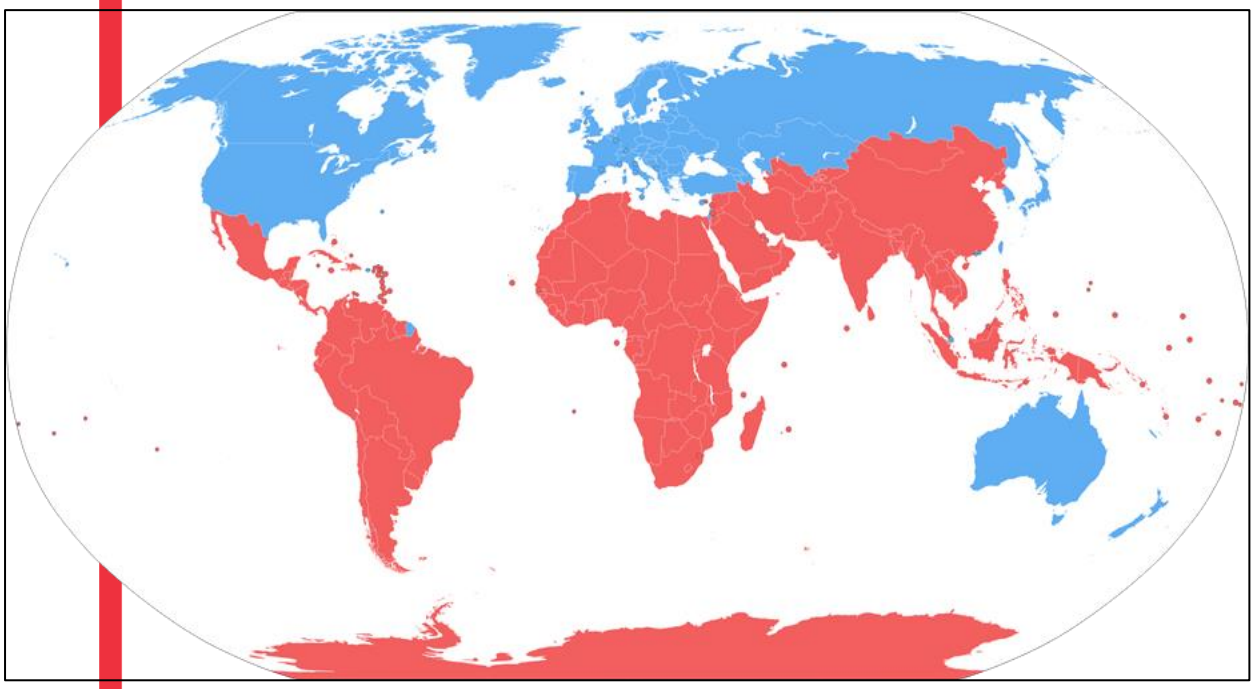
Constructing contextualised theories in career guidance and counselling – A North-South intercultural dialogue



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March 2022

UNIVERSITY OF DERBY | INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR GUIDANCE STUDIES

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Abstract

The career guidance and counselling field has produced theories from the Global North that have been imported and applied in Global South contexts. The Global South is often used to identify less economically developed countries. In this sense, these theories were produced in distinct cultural and socioeconomic contexts than those of the Global South, characterised by uncertainty and vulnerability. Theories and practices should be contextualised to assist the users of career guidance and counselling services properly and effectively. Thus, there is a growing awareness of the need to address the disadvantages experienced by individuals living in or from countries described as being in the Global South or by vulnerable groups from the Global North. One of the ways of addressing disadvantage is through intensive and potent processes of career construction; however, there are inequalities not just in the level of provision but also in the theories which support practice. In that vein, this paper aims to discuss the relations between power and the production of knowledge and the discrepancy between theory and reality in career guidance and counselling. Inspired by Boaventura de Sousa Santos's intercultural ideas, Bruno Latour's hybrid thoughts, and by a social constructionist perspective informed by Southern epistemologies, the paper explores principles to extend the explanatory power of the theories in a contextualised way proposing a North-South intercultural dialogue for achieving that goal.

Keywords

Career development theories, Global South, vulnerability, intercultural dialogue, social justice.

Introduction

World Bank (2013) proposes a global geopolitical division into two large blocks according to their socio-economic and political features. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, The United States, Western Europe, and developed countries of Asia compose the Global North, and Africa, Latin America, and developing Asia form the Global South. The Global South is often used to identify less economically developed countries.

According to Antunes (2015), contemporary Global South contexts exist in a new era of structural precarious work, facing an intense challenge to make working more flexible and informal. Despite recent developments and the consequent emergence of increased levels of stability in many Global South countries (e.g., Brazil, India, and South Africa), these countries are still characterised by social inequality and psychosocial vulnerability. Low qualification, informal work, insufficient income, and weakened social protection define most countries in the Global South (ILO, 2021).

I live and work in Brazil, which configures a suitable example to understand the characteristics and challenges for career guidance and counselling in the countries of the Global South. According to ILO (2021), recent data on the Brazilian Economically Active Population (EAP) showed that 40% were employed, 40% worked in unprotected

and unregulated jobs, 15% were unemployed, 51% were on an average monthly income of 279£, and 15% hold a university degree. In Brazil, the career construction of most people is characterised by informal discontinuous trajectories and not restricted to having employment, as Antunes (2015), Ribeiro *et al.* (2016), Costa (2020) and Flamini *et al.* (2021) stated. We can extend this panorama to most parts of the Global South contexts (CEPAL, 2020; ILO, 2020, 2021).

Thus, I have become interested in the idea of career guidance and social justice by the challenges generated by living, acting, and researching in a context marked by social inequality, working informality, and vulnerability that is quite different from the contexts in which the mainstream theories of the career guidance and counselling field have been produced.

According to Arulmani (2014a), Hooley and Sultana (2016), Rascován (2017), and Ribeiro (2021), the Global South has the power to help renew and democratize the field of career guidance and counselling. “Building theories from nondominant contexts is a matter of reshaping civilization by two political and social actions: (1) producing knowledge and innovation and (2) fostering respect for others by being respectful of local epistemologies” (Ribeiro, 2021: 5).

Career guidance and counselling mainstream practices have been founded on classical theories produced in the Global North (the United States and Europe). Employment, people with a university education from the middle and upper classes, and freedom of choice and autonomy have been the focus of these theories (McMahon *et al.*, 2008; Irving, 2010; Blustein, 2013; Arulmani, 2014a; Hooley & Sultana, 2016).
In this way, it is important to acknowledge that this traditional target population of career guidance and counselling does not correspond to most younger and adult workers worldwide. Moreover, samples of white and middle-class people from developed countries are the basis of these theories, for whom continuous paths accomplished in regular jobs or entrepreneurship projects characterised their career construction. This situation does not fit vulnerable groups from the Global North and most people of the Global South (Arulmani, 2007; Maree, 2010; Leong & Pearce, 2011; Nota *et al.*, 2014; Arulmani, 2014b; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2015; Duffy et al., 2016; Rascován, 2017; Sultana, 2017; McCash *et al.*, 2021).

This panorama poses a dilemma for Brazilian researchers and practitioners. Should we only understand and assist 15% of the Brazilian population, formed by highly qualified people, or should we seek to expand research and interventions for the entire population? To a greater or lesser extent, we can extend this question to all contexts.

The need to contextualise theories

If we decide to expand career guidance and counselling theories and practices, we should rethink theoretical approaches and reconstruct practices to produce contextualised career guidance and counselling to help us think about future projects within the broader working world (Hooley & Sultana, 2016; Blustein *et al.*, 2017; Guichard, 2018; Rossier *et al.*, 2020). We should seriously acknowledge the implications of context, as Sultana (2018: 48) stated by saying that “context matters”, and everyone should speak on their terms. In this sense, we should also recognise that “the world is epistemologically diverse, and this diversity provides intelligibility and intentionality to social experiences – including career guidance and counselling interventions and their outcomes” (Silva *et al.*, 2016: 47).

According to Freire (1970, 1975) and Santos (2014), theoretical approaches are socio-cultural constructions. Concepts and assumptions are therefore highly affected by social

and cultural features. This process shapes a worldview and a conception of the human being, which works as a life guide. Consequently, it establishes a hierarchy of power that determines who can produce knowledge and which concepts are legitimate, defining a dominant symbolic system. With the leadership from the Global North, this system has forged the key concepts for career guidance and counselling theories, making them the valid ones. As a result, they have been the most used ones all over the globe (Blustein, 2006; Irving, 2010; Hooley & Sultana, 2016; Sultana, 2018).
That is the reason why these concepts cannot fully explain the working life and careers of vulnerable groups from the Global North and most people of the Global South in a proper and contextualised manner, bringing criticisms on this observed trend of a predominance of theories from the Global North in the career guidance and counselling field, which are described below.

Firstly, mainstream theories, such as trait-factor, social cognitive, and life design, are considered as neutral constructions and grounded on a supposed official version of reality imposing a dominant symbolic system (Rascován, 2005; Irving, 2010; Leong & Pearce, 2011; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2015; Sultana, 2018).

Secondly, the predominance of a theoretical and conceptual basis from the Global North de-contextualises, universalises, and imposes a way of knowing and being through the theoretical approaches in which culture-specific assumptions from a given context are adapted and legitimised as concepts from the mainstream (Irving, 2010; Arulmani, 2014a). An official version of reality supports these concepts, which establishes and forces the already mentioned dominant symbolic system (Blustein, 2006; Irving, 2010; Sultana, 2018). Moreover, these concepts are “culturally biased, thus creating barriers in recognising the needs of clients who come from a different culture” (Launikari & Puukari, 2005: 31).

This conceptual trend brings us to the issue of universalism versus particularism. Are there universalised concepts that can be applied in any context without changes? Or does every concept need to be contextualised to become valid? Rosenfield and Pauli (2012: 322) state that there exists a tension between the universal and particular; “on the one hand, the existence of an absolute and universal value, inherent in all human beings anytime and anywhere; and, on the other hand, the particular nature”. That is why it is necessary to recognise that both are required and relevant. In this sense, the authors propose that “the universal concept is not the starting point, but the endpoint.” Arulmani *et al.* (2011: 62) complement this idea by stating that a theoretical production should have “a sensitivity to differences coupled with an interest in identifying unifying or universal concepts.”

Thirdly, it privileges universalisms over localisms and considers localism just one example of cultural diversity. Sultana (2018) contended that leading theoretical models aiming at universalism are wrong and dangerous. They seem to be wrong because they fail to understand local realities; and dangerous because they fail to assist the development of the others.

Fourthly, it focuses on persons regardless of social and cultural context (Irving, 2010; Hooley & Sultana, 2016), which draws attention to the individualism-collectivism issue (Maree, 2010). Independence, autonomy, and agency better define individualistic cultures. And the primacy of traditions, social integrity, and group norms (e.g., family, community, or religion) better determine collectivistic cultures (Brewer & Chen, 2007). In general, individualism characterises the Global North, and collectivism best defines the Global South, with exceptions and possibilities for intermediate positions between individualism and collectivism (Arulmani, 2007; Maree, 2010; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2015; Fan &

Leong, 2016). Consequently, it fails to recognise differences and diversity regarding race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, religion, and their intersections, as Duffy *et al.* (2016) stressed.

Fifthly, these theories were developed in contexts defined as socio-economically stable and safe, as distinct from those characterised by vulnerability, informality, and instability (Maree, 2010; Ribeiro, 2021). Moreover, these theories are usually grounded on freedom of choice, and the socioeconomic conditions, religious values, and duties to the family strongly constrained them in vulnerable contexts (Leong & Pearce, 2011; Arulmani, 2014b). Blustein (2013) argued that the higher the level of social equality, the greater the chance of a person being autonomous and having greater freedom of choice. That is the opposite of the most vulnerable contexts worldwide and makes mainstream theories appropriated to the few.

And finally, these mainstream theories disregard the diverse ways to be human and live in the world, as Sultana (2018) argued. This scenario has contributed to the disappearance of cultural differences from local contexts and has generated oppression and social injustice through producing accepted knowledge, theories, and practices. Santos (2014: 31-32) pointed out that “global social injustice is, therefore, intimately linked to global cognitive injustice. The struggle for global justice must therefore be a struggle for global cognitive justice as well.”

It is necessary to recognise that the Global North has also discussed and has proposed conceptual foundations that stress the importance of context and the relations, although these are less used than the individualistic mainstream (Hooley & Sultana, 2016).

Importing theories: issues and ways

Ribeiro (2021) proposes four ways in which career guidance and counselling theories can be imported and employed in a different context from the one in which they are produced, namely: incorporation, adaptation, refusal, and co-construction. The first way is to import mainstream theories constructed in each context, generally from Global North contexts, and apply them in another context with no changes (incorporation or reproduction without adaptation). The second way is to import mainstream theories and apply them in other contexts with changes to address local singularities (adaptation or reproduction with adaptation). The third way is to ignore pre-existing mainstream theories and produce a new theoretical approach grounded on their context detached from what is produced in the mainstream of career guidance and counselling theories (refusal, isolation, and production). The fourth way is producing theories "through an intercultural dialogue between dominant knowledge from the Global North and contextualised daily life knowledge (intercultural dialogue through co-construction)" (Ribeiro, 2021: 3-4).
The first two ways produce both action and decontextualised knowledge. The third way does not allow either an intercultural dialogue or the breakdown of the power hierarchy to propose theories and concepts, making contexts isolated, such as those of the Global South. It is important to note that adaptation and refusal are the often-used strategies in the Global South. We strongly support the fourth way since it opens greater possibilities for conceptual reconstruction and a rebalancing of power in the knowledge production process since it proposes a theoretical contextualised construction. It aims to open space for a North-South dialogue that undertakes the value of both theoretical bodies but without enforcing one upon another.

Principles for contextualising career guidance and counselling approaches

Aiming to make contributions to face these challenges, we propose three basic principles for contextualising career guidance and counselling approaches: relational ontology, hybridism, and interculturality to produce knowledge. These principles blend the Global North epistemologies with contextualised theories from the South and constitute the process of contextualised knowledge construction. Relational ontology is the epistemological basis, intercultural dialogue is the means of construction, and hybrid is the potential outcome.

For such, we will introduce the ideas of contemporary authors outside the field of career guidance and counselling who have been thinking about the complexity of the current world and proposing principles for life in the 21st century, namely: Gergen (1997), McNamee (2012), Santos (2014), and Latour (1993, 2005). We will put these authors in dialogue with authors from the field of career guidance and counselling to propose a potential way of constructing contextualised theoretical approaches.

Relational ontology

Inspired by a social constructionist perspective (Gergen, 1997; McNamee & Gergen,1999; McNamee, 2012) informed by Southern epistemologies (Freire, 1970, 1975; Martín-Baró, 1994; Spink & Spink, 2015) and in relation with the field of career guidance and counselling (Savickas *et al.*, 2009; Blustein, 2011), relational ontology is the epistemological basis for the process of contextualised knowledge construction.
As advocated by social constructionism (McNamee, 2012) and emphasised by Blustein (2011), relational ontology means that knowledge is produced by relationships between different people from distinct cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in everyday life. Thus, it is always contextualised or psychosocial knowledge, "understood as a process that is neither 'psychological' nor 'social' but transcends the separation of these elements to create something new – the psychosocial" (Ribeiro, 2015: 20). Knowledge is just a discourse on reality, not reality by itself.

To that extent, knowledge has never been universal but has always been a relational and contextualised construction that should be deconstructed and reconstructed when employed in different contexts. Thus, relational ontology refers to the epistemological perspective that most knowledge is generated in daily practices, rather than constituted as abstract knowledge. According to Freire (1970), knowledge construction occurs in social praxis, so any practice should be done with others, not for others or by others, as in the case of career guidance and counselling. This view underpins interculturality (Santos, 2014).

It is worth noting that assuming a relational ontology does not imply denying the material existence of people and things since the only existing reality would be the reality of the relation, in which persons and things exist as a constituent part of the relation (Ribeiro, 2017: 125).

Intercultural dialogue

As previously mentioned, Santos (2014: 31-32) pointed out that "global social injustice is, therefore, intimately linked to global cognitive injustice. The struggle for global justice must therefore be a struggle for global cognitive justice as well". Cognitive justice refers

to the search for equality between several kinds of knowledge of distinct cultural matrices, mainly among scientific and daily life knowledge.
"The world, however globalised it may seem, is composed of a plurality of cultures" (Ribeiro & Fonçatti, 2017: 197). Santos (2002: 41) defines globalisation as "the process by which a given local condition or entity succeeds in extending its reach over the globe and, by doing so, develops the capacity to designate a rival social condition or entity as local". Thus, globalisation is formed by the social relationships among local cultures resulting in greater influence from some cultures over others.

As already mentioned, theoretical approaches are socio-cultural constructions, and we hold the view that culture refers to symbolic systems which arrange social life by means of shared values, knowledge, and practices. Furthermore, a socio-cultural system guides our reflections, decisions, actions, and positions as Blustein (2011, 2013) stated. In the career guidance and counselling field, most parts of the researchers and practitioners use theories from Global North. Nevertheless, the entire context in which they were designed is not imported along with it.

From the outset, it is necessary to stress the need to recognise local context when constructing concepts and theoretical approaches, as stated by Freire (1970), Martin-Baró (1994), McNamee and Gergen (1999), Blustein (2011), Leong and Peace (2011), Santos (2014), Spink and Spink (2015), Sultana (2017) and Blustein *et al.* (2019).

There is value in epistemological diversity existing in the world and avoiding hegemonic and universalised career theories as well as career guidance and counselling practices based on them. This diversity only emerges when studying local realities, because we can only understand people's experiences by understanding the contextual epistemological matrices that influence them (Ribeiro & Fonçatti, 2017: 197).

It is important to emphasise that diversity occurs in several dimensions: between different contexts and among people of the same context with distinct characteristics, regarding the intersectionality of class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, among others.
Santos (2014) asserts that the intercultural dialogue perspective aims to foster co-construction of theoretical approaches and corresponding practices through a relation between diverse knowledge and expertise from different contexts (e.g., the Global South and the Global North). The author calls this relationship between universal and specific knowledge as an ecology of knowledge. "It is premised on the idea that all knowledge has limits and its construction should be effected by means of dialogue between different knowledge embodied in distinct social practices" (Ribeiro, 2017: 268).

Here, it is essential to mention that no kind of knowledge can be privileged over the other, and neither can the resulting knowledge be universalized because production of knowledge is always incomplete, and any universalizing claim is false. A theoretical and conceptual reconstruction is always required and should be carried out in a dialogical manner with the context (Freire, 1975; Hooley & Sultana, 2016; Martín-Baró, 1994) or in co-construction with the context (Nota & Rossier, 2015) (Ribeiro, 2021: 6).

Thus, incompleteness is the key factor for producing knowledge, and the best way to achieve that is to foster dialogues between everyone involved in the situation from different contexts and social positions (e.g., researchers, practitioners, and clients in a career counselling setting). It seeks to avoid imposing universalising concepts and promote intercultural dialogue.

Inspired by Freire (1970) and Martin-Baró (1994), we averred that "valid knowledge is therefore contextualised knowledge; it is valid when it considers cultural differences and political differences... It should be oriented toward reality, which is taken both as a starting and an arrival point" (Silva *et al.*, 2016: 48).
According to Santos (2014), four principles underpin an intercultural dialogue:

First, recognition of mutual incompleteness. Secondly, the exchange between different meaning realities, what makes it a dialogical and psychosocial perspective. Thirdly, openness to the interculturality where one knowledge does not annul the other, but both produce a third kind of knowledge as resulting from the encounter. It is defined by a process of co-construction, what Santos also refers to as mestizo knowledge. And, finally, a hierarchy of contextual knowledge that requires an intercultural translation (Ribeiro, 2017: 126).

For example, the counsellor is generally responsible for appreciating the needs of their clients in career guidance and counselling settings. However, through intercultural dialogue, the understanding process should be constructed on the relationship between the counsellor's technical-scientific knowledge and the client's everyday life knowledge. These different knowledge and social positions are complementary, and a contextualised understanding is only possible through the joining of the two. We should consider everyday knowledge (non-scientific knowledge) as relevant and legitimate as scientific knowledge. Santos (2002) names this process as diatopical hermeneutics.

Diatopical hermeneutics is based on the idea that the *topoi* of an individual culture, no matter how strong they may be, are as incomplete as the culture itself. Such incompleteness is not visible from inside the culture itself since aspiration to the totality induces taking *pars pro toto*. The objective of diatopical hermeneutics is, therefore, not to achieve completeness -that being an unachievable goal- but, on the contrary, to raise the consciousness of reciprocal incompleteness to its possible maximum by engaging in the dialogue, as it were, with one foot in one culture and the other in another. Herein lies its *dia-topical* character (Santos, 2002: 41).

Thus, in this rationale, the process of interpretation (hermeneutics) is conducted between persons or groups in different and unequal social positions regarding the production of knowledge (*di* – two and *topoi* – positions or knowledge production places – *diatopical*). Silva *et al.* (2016: 51) gives an example of how this rationale may be employed:

A good example of this is when a person whose working life is predominantly marked by informal jobs, seeks help to think about his or her career. Counsellors usually have little personal experience of work in this precarious sector of the labour market, and therefore require the everyday knowledge of the counselee to be able to help him or her in the process of building career projects.

In this relationship, intercultural dialogue is generated between different and unequal knowledge, and the production of knowledge takes place more horizontally and democratically, aiming to reduce the pre-established hierarchy of power. Thus, there is no dominant and true dialogue without recognising the others' knowledge. Firstly, by seeking to deconstruct this hierarchical power relationship between the counsellor and the client. And secondly, by horizontalising this relationship, breaking the power differences and assuming that both can produce knowledge. As already mentioned, in line with Freire (1975: 32), we must build knowledge "*with* others, not *for* others".

The intercultural dialogue rationale requires a readiness for co-construction between different knowledge, cultures, and socioeconomic positions. It should always be a mutual decision; otherwise, it will be a new type of imposition. And the outcome of this dialogue depends on the possibility of both personal and socio-cultural legitimisation and recognition. It will depend on the change potentiality of reconstructing relationships with the contexts. If there is any psychosocial recognition of change, the result of the intercultural dialogue conducted shall be a hybrid, as we discuss below.
Regarding the career guidance and counselling field, an innovation with change potentiality is always relational, emerges distinctly from the standards, and may be considered unusual by the mainstream. On the one hand, it cannot be culturally and socially recognised and remains strange by the theoretical mainstream. And on the other hand, it may be culturally and socially recognised and be integrated as a hybrid into this mainstream (dominant symbolic system).

Hybridism

Inspired by Latour (1993, 2005), we may say that hybrid "refers to a weave of connections where the common denominator is the combination of many things from distinct orders which results in something excessive (or, conversely, something missing)" (Madeira, 2010: 1). It is defined by a field of heterogeneous stresses, where a possibility of multiple connections and inputs exists. Any of the hybrids is "the outcome of the combination of many things, objects or practices from distinct orders. None of them fits in pure or fixed categories, on the contrary, they fit in hybrid or monstrous categories" (Madeira, 2010: 2).

The innovative outcome of the relationship tends to first emerge as a monster defined as relational emergent distinct from usual, as an anomalous out of order. Later, it may become a hybrid and integrate into the order of things, depending on the openness of the context.

One first example would be the emergence of transgender people, breaking down the institutionalised divide between sexes and the genders and producing a pluralisation on the definitions (or lack of a defining) of the sexual orientations. Traditionally, a transgender person has been treated as anomalous and prevented from coexisting in society; however, if relationships in each context change, a possibility to live in the world as someone recognised is created. This process of consolidating a hybrid generates, on the one hand, a reaction of acceptance and, on the other, the reinforcement of existing stigmas. In this case, a transgender person can be seen as a monster without a recognised cultural and social place, or s/he can be named as woman or man and have his/her gender identity legitimised and socially recognised, thereby becoming a hybrid.
We can use the same line of reasoning to analyse informal or unregulated work. A person, who works in an unregulated job, may be defined as an informal worker and be seen as a monster by the dominant symbolic system, or s/he can be considered an entrepreneur and have her or his working activity socially legitimised, making it a hybrid as well.

Hybridism carries the potentiality to gradually break with the knowledge hierarchies and foster the multiplication of social roles, identities, and relationships. This expansion involves comprehending and revising the dominant symbolic system established by the existing theories. First, researchers and practitioners need to realise that dominant knowledge exists. And then, assume its incompleteness, considering everyday local knowledge to produce contextualised understanding through the joining of the two by diatopical hermeneutics process as Santos (2014) proposed.

Implications for practice

Inspired by the previous discussion, we propose some specific principles in conducting career guidance and counselling processes. First, we should act based on situated knowledge and intercultural views and actions. Second, career guidance and counselling practices should strongly consider the sociocultural context. Third, interventions should be extended to the social contexts to foster psychological and sociocultural positioning change. Fourth, communitarian strategies and group-based interventions should be added to the traditional one-to-one work with persons to meet both individual and collective cultural models. It allows assisting people from Global North and Global South. Finally, we should hold a logic of co-construction through diatopical hermeneutics to engender intercultural dialogues and hybrid outcomes.

Conclusion

Diversifying and contextualising the epistemological level is working for social justice since it expands the understanding of both the working world and career guidance and counselling theories always in a relational way by intercultural dialogues.

Grounded on relational ontology, hybridism, and interculturality, we can construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the career guidance and counselling field through two movements of knowledge production. First, we may co-construct it by hybrid understandings between epistemologies from Global North and Global South, as well as from Modern and Post-modern ones. And secondly, we may co-construct it by hybrid understandings between the counsellor's scientific knowledge and the client's everyday life knowledge. As Watson (2007) has already proposed, career guidance and counselling should be conducted through hybrid strategies in which relationships should be co-constructed based on daily dialogues between different epistemologies, dominant discourses, and local discourses.

In conclusion, for constructing contextualised theories, we must conceive reality and the production of knowledge and practices as co-constructions. In other words, knowledge and practices would always be relational, not universal apriorism. In this sense, relational ontology would define the production of knowledge, and, to this end, an intercultural dialogue between universalising and singular conceptions of each context would be necessary. This dialogue would produce hybrids as a way of conceptual change and greater theoretical contextualisation generated by the co-construction between the established and the emerging contextual novelty. That is a promising and empowering proposal to theoretically renew the field of career guidance and counselling and generate contextualised practices.

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