

Anna Bilon

University of Lower Silesia, Wrocław

Social Control and the Reinforcement of the Social Order: Unintended Consequences of Career Guidance?

The article offers a critical analysis of the social role of career/vocational counselling. The issue is becoming increasingly relevant as official social (and educational) policies accord career/vocational counselling more and more prominence. The article examines a (seeming?) paradox observable in the theory and practice of career/vocational counselling. Specifically, on the one hand, career/vocational counselling is a “victim” of (neoliberal) market reforms and changes, while on the other hand it supports and propagates these changes.

Keywords: career guidance, neoliberalism, social order, social control

On the complexity of the social role of career guidance

As any other individual activity and social action, vocational counselling is subject to continuous transformations and changes both in terms of its organisation and in terms of scholarly discourse, which determine the (ever morphing) shape of this practice. Since counselling is not isolated from the social context but, on the contrary, co-produces this context (cf. Giddens, 1984)¹, it is relevant to inquire what role it fulfils in contemporary societies. Official European and national policy documents define career/vocational counselling as an instrument of social and educational policy, “promoting social and economic goals” (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network [ELGPN], 2010, p. 7). As such social functions are being ascribed to counselling, a need arises to examine their significance and meaning, especially in the age of the (ostensibly) increasing importance of counselling underscored in the EU directives and guidelines (Watts, Sultana, & McCarthy, 2010). Such studies are all the more indispensable as the social function of counselling exhibits both

¹ For example, in Germany, where students are relatively early expected to make decisions about their further educational and vocational paths, career/vocational counselling (or more precisely educational counselling) can quite significantly contribute to shaping the education structure of German society (OECD, 2002).

continuity and change, which are reflected for example in vocational guidance policy. Hence, as I emphatically argue in this paper, exploring the social role of counselling and its consequences in order to grasp the eponymous social order requires profound analyses and the dismissal of one-sided perspectives (and attitudes), whether critical ones as proposed for example by Wojciech Kruszelnicki (2015) or affirmative ones which tout the helping role of counselling as unambiguously positive. On the one hand, the complexity of the role of career/vocational counselling results from its embedment in several contexts of social life and the multiplicity of actors that participate in it (Kargulowa, 2013). On the other hand, this complexity is linked to the fact that in counselling, as in any other human practice, unintended consequences are encountered, which is emphasised for example by Anthony Giddens (1984), or what Raymond Boudon called perverse effects are observed, that is, “individual and collective effects that result from the juxtaposition of individual behaviours and yet were not included in the actors’ explicit objectives” (Boudon, 1982, p. 5). Besides, inscribed in the structure of the social function of counselling and guidance, as in the structure of any other human action, are so-called authoritative resources, i.e. “non-material resources involved in the generation of power, deriving from the capability of harnessing the activities of human beings [and resulting] from the domination of some actors over others” (Giddens, 1984, p. 373). This fundamentally diversifies the scope of possibilities of producing goals, tasks and functions for the actors involved in the counselling process (i.e. political decision-makers, counsellors, counselees, etc.), as well as highlighting the fact that these functions work at several levels. Given this, my article proposes an analysis of the social role of career/vocational counselling which is underpinned by two assumptions:

1. The current social reality is dominated by discourse² shaped by the neoliberal idea of the social order (Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2005) with all its consequences experienced at every level of individual lives and social life, such as increased social inequalities, economic crises and related changes on labour markets, the domination of instrumental rationality (Kwaśnica, 1987), etc. Because the domination of the market orientation is abundantly described in the literature, I will not examine this issue here. To highlight the emerging social structures and the systemic mechanisms of social exclusions, what I mean by the social order in this paper is an amalgam of the exacerbating social stratification (e.g. Birchfield, 2008), the new class division (Bilon, Kurantowicz, & Noworolnik-Mastalska, 2016), the changeability and liquidity of reality and the conditions/opportunities/life chances it offers.
2. Identifying the social role of counselling in today’s social reality takes exploring and adopting an attitude to this role in the context of the social order as defined

² Here discourse is taken to denote “all the practices and meanings shaping a particular community of social actors” (Howarth, 2000, p. 5).

above. In this framework, we cannot but perceive a peculiar paradox; namely, career/vocational counselling, which is an element of social support and helping systems (Kargulowa, 2007), serves at the same time as a tool of contemporary social policy and (post)neoliberal³ reforms and as a “promoter” of the neoliberal discourse of employability, flexibility, adaptation to the labour market, etc. Simultaneously, career/vocational counselling is a specific “victim” of these reforms and their ramifications, similarly to other spheres of social life.

Below, I will draw on these assumptions and describe them in more detail, defining their relevance to my thematic concerns. The fundamental thesis of this article is that career/vocational counselling is an instrument of social control, and that as such, it contributes to the reproduction of the neoliberal social order to the same degree and extent as other organised systems of human practices (e.g. education) (see Potulicka & Rutkowiak, 2010), due to the current omnipotent affirmation of broadly conceived “markets.” Similarly to these systems, counselling is also a specific “victim” of this affirmation. The highlighting of this paradox by default entails a critique of the neoliberal principles of social life and of support-provision for individuals as members of neoliberal society. Thereby, we should notice that since the onset of institutional counselling, this support (Kargulowa, 2003) has been “ancillary” to social orders. Mentioned above, the observable continuity in the social roles ascribed to counselling consists in counselling consistently having a helping role attributed to it. This is visible for example in that in the age of industrialism counselling was expected, as Marcin Szumigraj puts it, “to put a right man at the right place” (Szumigraj, 2010, p. 29), while today career/vocational counselling is supposed to place EVERY person on the side of flexibility and adaptation to change. Continuity thus concerns the very fact of counselling having social roles ascribed to it, and change concerns the substance of these roles, which has been redefined alongside with the recasting of the rules of social life observable (more or less) since the 1970s (Harvey, 2010).

Career guidance: A “propagator” or a “victim” of the liberal order?

If in the previous section, I only signalled the paradox inherent in the role of career/vocational counselling in every social order generally and in the age of neoliberalism particularly, my argument in this section will analyse in more detail the specificity of this paradox, that is, illuminate the complexity of these issues. In doing this, I will rely on critical discourse analysis and my own research on the system of counselling and guidance in the Netherlands (Bilon, 2016) and other countries.

³ This term refers to broadly conceived changes which took place for example in Latin America and other countries after what has come to be known as the crisis of liberal politics. See, e.g. J. Grugel & P. Riggirozzi (2012).

Some of my findings are presented below in Table 1, which includes the contexts/dimensions of career guidance I have singled out: economic, political, research, ethical and cultural. Although they do not make up a complete set of contexts/dimensions, they appear to be particularly relevant to the shape of social practices. This becomes fully visible if we adopt the principle of double hermeneutics in social research (Giddens, 1984), that is, when we assume that contexts shape social practices to a similar degree to which they are themselves shaped by these contexts. In fact, these contexts/dimensions are mutually interrelated and they are only separated into distinct entities for the sake of analysis.

Table 1 has basically two major reference points: (1) the central assumption that the current social reality and social (dis)order are of neoliberal nature and display classically defined neoliberal characteristics, such as decentralisation, deregulation and privatisation of several fields of social life and the perception of the market as a stimulator and regulator of all spheres of social life (Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2005) and (2) a critical stance on the contemporary neoliberal paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 2014). In this Table, I present processes/tendencies observable in career guidance and identifiable approaches informing it. Of course, presented in the table-form these insights are considerably simplified and generalised. Additionally, the Table is not complete as it does not show all the possible and recognisable phenomena in career/vocational counselling. Its aim is to highlight complex and ongoing processes in the most lucid way possible, while they are analysed in more detail below.

As the Table indicates, there are basically as many arguments for the status of career/vocational counselling as a “propagator” (promoter?) of the neoliberal social order as there are arguments for the entirely opposite assessment. Furthermore, we could actually inquire whether the promotion of this order essentially results from the fact that counselling, as other spheres of social life, has been dominated by the neoliberal paradigm (Kargulowa, 2015). Such an interpretation is supported by the observation that counselling had been institutionalised before neoliberal discourse appeared in global politics. As already indicated, the dissemination and promotion of neoliberal values in the area of career/vocational counselling are not exceptional phenomena; they are only more vividly recognisable in counselling than in other disciplines and spheres of social life due to the specific locatedness of counselling and its inseparable link to the labour market. The labour market is commonly known to form a specific organisational axis of contemporary societies, and its stability is a priority of political decision-makers, even though our reality is referred to as the “world of vanishing employment” (Mielczarek, 2014; Szkudlarek, 2005).

Table 1. The paradoxical role of career/vocational counselling in the neoliberal reality

Context/ Dimension	Career guidance as a “propagator” of neoliberalism	Career guidance as a “victim of neoliberalism”
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the cheapest form of social help, especially in the form of mediated counselling it is the labour market that regulates the demand for it; the market is put at the centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> privatised in several countries visible cuts in the state funding of career/vocational counselling
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “solving” social problems (with unemployment) instrument of social policy domination of activity-enhancing social policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> decentralised in many countries deregulated in many countries
Ethical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> based on neoliberal values and (neo)liberal concepts of social justice enforcing the recognition of the market as a value in and of itself which is independent of social norms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reduction of the value of the human being and helping processes counsellors’ helplessness and compulsion to ground interventions on pro-market values
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> promoting cultural and vocational mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> attempts at unification of counselling policies and practices in various countries
Theoretical and research-related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> theories underscore the necessity to adapt to the labour market and unemployment periods language: flexibility, employability, competitiveness on the labour market 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a growing number of market-oriented studies domination of pragmatism individualised approach and a dearth of social analyses of counselling

In the economic and political dimensions, career/vocational counselling has been recognised as one of the best forms of supporting learning and solving problems related to unemployment and poverty. At the same time, counselling is one of the cheapest interventions, particularly when it is provided in a mediated form (online), which is the case on the Dutch labour market (Bilon, 2016). Simultaneously, in their efforts to reduce the cost of providing career/vocational counselling services, many countries have implemented various political mechanisms which limit its development. Such practices include, for example, the digitalisation of counselling or making it mandatory for schools to provide counselling and guidance for students on the basis of the general funding they obtain. Thereby fixed limits are often set, as in the UK, where counselling is stipulated to account for about 0.9% of total expenditure of a school (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014). Notably, this

proportion does not actually seem adequate if counselling is touted as a nearly *key* factor in supporting education and preventing unemployment. Regarding the role accorded to counselling, it must however be admitted that, on the whole, European countries allot growing proportions of their GDP to combating unemployment-related problems and implementing activity-promoting policies, which can be perceived as an outcome of an exacerbation of negative developments (in particular of long-term unemployment) (European Commission, 2016). Thus although career/vocational counselling is regarded as an exceptionally important element in the prevention of negative social phenomena, such as unemployment, social exclusion and poverty, it is underfunded (Bilon, 2016), marginalised and consequently of little utility in several countries. Economising on counselling considerably reduces, if not precludes, not only its effectiveness but also its accessibility. When reading international policy documents (e.g. OECD, 2004), one can easily form an impression that political authorities and decision makers are committed, which translates into international policies (e.g. through setting benchmarks, issuing documents and international agreements which make it compulsory for governments to provide access to counselling, etc.); however, at the end of the day governments often only go through the motions (e.g. in the Netherlands), which is almost obvious at the level of reports and documents (Bilon, 2016). As can be seen, counselling, like education, has been inscribed in realities which Mark Murphy (2010) refers to as “audit culture.” In audit culture, efficiency, documentation and narrowly conceived quality are the goal of an institution’s organisation and work.

Another neoliberal mechanism is exemplified in the introduction of private providers of counselling services or, in the most general terms, in the establishment of a counselling market through decentralisation (accountability of individual schools and offices) and deregulation of legislation (e.g. the lowering of career counsellors’ status through abolishing the requirement of specialised university qualifications, which happened for example in Poland) (JoL, 2013, item 353). These solutions considerably affect the quality of counselling, which can clearly be seen, for example, in the Netherlands (Bilon, 2016). In Poland, the deregulation of the profession threatens to reduce the quality of counselling help-provision if individuals are allowed to practice counselling without having counselling competences and predispositions (Wojtasik & Kargulowa, 2003). Their interventions may prove not only ineffective but even harmful, especially if we remember that helping by definition is not a neutral practice (cf. Murgatroyd, 2000).

Privatisation also causes negative consequences for counselling. As my research in the Netherlands has shown, private service-providers admittedly offer more comprehensive interventions and practically implement the model of career/vocational counselling approximating the Life Design paradigm (rather than directive counselling frameworks which fail to locate vocational choices in up-to-date scholarly discourse and to apply lifelong, holistic approaches and corresponding intervention methods), but their services are only accessible to a narrow group of clients. As

a result, career/vocational counselling is not accessible to those who need it most, such as members of marginalised and excluded groups (Bilon, 2014). Other possible (and observable) effects of privatisation and decentralisation include the closing down of state companies/institutions and unequal development of counselling in various regions (Meijers, 2001). Ultimately, thus, these mechanisms contribute to social stratification and the uneven development of the country.

In broader (macrosocial) terms, counselling can be perceived as a specific “prosthesis.” Specifically, instead of being invested in generating new jobs, funds are invested in “individual people,” which, as observed by Deborah Johnston, “may be necessary but not sufficient to reduce poverty [and unemployment, A. B.], if employment or self-employment opportunities are missing” (Johnston, 2005, p. 140). Besides, social policy, as Michał Mielczarek (2014) stresses, is pervaded by activity-promoting discourse, even though career counsellors are perfectly aware that not all clients of counselling have predispositions and competences for “being entrepreneurial and active.” Notably, the awareness that such social policies are inadequate suggests that career/vocational counselling practice may be pervaded by mechanisms of power and coercion, which I mentioned in the first part of this paper. Let me remind at this point that, from the perspective of individual counselling practitioners (counsellors), the reproduction of the neoliberal social order can be an unintended consequence of helping interventions or a perverse effect evoked above.

The domination of neoliberal discourse is particularly palpable in the cultural dimension. On the one hand, this domination is visible in attempts to homogenise the policies and organisation of counselling systems (e.g. through the implementation of European directives); on the other, it is observable in the emphasis with which today’s career/vocational counselling (and its theory) insists that people in our times must be ready for occupational mobility, etc. Occupational mobility and work migrations also have their negative facets and consequences (Surdykowska & Szmit, 2016), which is rarely articulated both in counselling practice and in the counselling-studies literature. The common tendency is to make career/vocational counselling clients prepared for at least eleven job changes (Sennet, 1998) over their lifetimes, whereby these changes can involve spatial/geographical relocations.

In macro-social terms, the homogenisation of counselling shows, for example, in attempts to apply theoretical approaches and practical solutions in countries and cultures of fundamentally different cultural and historical conditions. The end result usually is that these solutions are poorly adapted to, if not entirely forgetful of, the local context. Ronald G. Sultana, who explored this issue in more detail, stresses that in most cases the application of concrete solutions is basically redundant because countries as a rule have their own tested practices which simply fall into oblivion or are artificially and forcefully ousted (Sultana, 2009). As a result, the theory, organisation and practice of counselling are steeped in a specific single-mindedness, the prevalence of one discipline (psychology) and the domination of its preferred theoretical approaches and practical solutions. Discourse analyses

imply that such frameworks are preferred in core countries, such as the US and the UK (cf. Wallerstein, 2004). Therefore, cultural homogenisation takes place in particular in counselling theory and research, where, as stressed for example by Mark L. Savickas (2003), theories of career development and counselling have long implicitly presupposed that their target is a white, middle-class person, without taking into account cultural differences while ignoring the fact that if these differences are indeed considered the development of universal theories is essentially precluded (Bilon & Kargul, 2012; Mau, 2000; Young, Marshall, & Valach, 2007).

Other types of weaknesses also plague current counselling research and theories. They include: the focus on individuals with clearly insufficient attention to social contexts and critical approaches; the domination of the pragmatic approach to research and to the development of theories, which involves a disproportional attention to the methodology of counselling interventions; an affirmative attitude to social changes (perceived as opportunities rather than as structural barriers); and ascription of excessive agency both to counselling and to individuals (cf. Savickas, 2011; Savickas et al., 2009; Savickas, 1995; Minta, 2012; Wojtasik, 2011; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009). All these tendencies can be regarded as an effect of the prevalence of the neoliberal tenet that individuals are fully responsible for their lives (Potulicka, 2010), which entails the privatization and individualization of problems which are in fact social (structural), such as unemployment, which is an outcome of economic crises and/or of the mechanisms of global capital allocations.

These tendencies are fundamentally informed by the system of values underpinned by (neo)liberalism and its concepts of social justice, which affirm freedom (of action, of economic processes) (Kolm, 2002), individuality (instead of communality), the ethos of competitiveness as the pivot of social life (Amable, 2011, pp. 3-30) and a specific concept of human value and identity which is currently, as argued by Ilana Gershon and Allison Alexy (2011), "the self as a *business*." As far as the ethics of help- and support-provision is concerned, this has resulted, for example, in the focus on self-help, the domination of market values, the notion of human identity as a fragmented, discontinuous individual that requires self-monitoring, updating and, primarily, assuming personal responsibility for all decisions, etc. Importantly, the individual has been made responsible for the course of his/her working life to the degree to which s/he is accountable for the course of his/her education, which from the perspective of the organisation of social policy (and labour market policy) is a relatively "convenient" concept, for it exempts the state from responsibility. Instead of investing in the generation of new jobs, the state can invest (funds which are anyway very modest, as already mentioned) in counselling, heedless of the fact that there are places, both in Poland and worldwide, where finding a job is really challenging, if not downright impossible.

At the macro-social level, there is a conspicuous pattern underlying the neoliberal ethics of helping (together with its socio-economic consequences). Specifically, helping is only perceived as proper (and effective, which is in and of itself

an exemplification of the pragmatic approach to help-provision) when it is based on the neoliberal values listed above (for example, counsellors in Job Centres are, so to speak, compelled to promote entrepreneurial and “pro-active” attitudes, etc.) (Mielczarek, 2015). As a consequence, helping processes become unethical, turning into what Peter Plant and Rie Thomsen (2012) call “social control in a velvet glove.” This control is driven by the ethics of efficiency instead of the ethics of care (Murphy, 2010, p. 78). The paradox of non-ethical helping in the neoliberal social (dis)order consists in that help can be described as *sham help* if ultimately the individual is anyway responsible for the entire course of his/her working life. The “velvet glove” only helps disguise the clear pursuit to bolster the attitudes of entrepreneurship, employability, etc. Given that “efficiency” rather than care for the fate of the individual is underscored in counselling help, we can legitimately conclude that the very idea of helping has been distorted.

Conclusion

My argument above primarily highlights ambiguities in the role of career/vocational counselling, which may very well invite an ambivalent (to say the least) appraisal of counselling in today's world. At the same time, we must bear in mind that the logic of the neoliberal order with its paradigm of entrepreneurship and efficiency is so deeply entrenched in our social reality that nearly all social practices/spheres of social life are complicit in sustaining and reproducing it (Lemm & Vatter, 2014). The clearly observable, albeit rather specific, “engagement” of career/vocational counselling in this respect is, as already mentioned, an outcome of its inseparable link to the labour market and of the fact that its primary role (which it has been ascribed to it since it was institutionalised) has been helping individuals find their place on the broadly conceived labour market. Hence, I believe, the debate on the role of career/vocational counselling in societies is essentially a debate on quite a different issue altogether, as it actually concerns helping processes as such and the extent to which these processes can (by definition) contribute to social change or, to the contrary, the extent to which they should help individuals adapt to the conditions of social life. After all, help offered within a given social order is by default designed to support people's efforts to find their place within this very order/paradigm. To establish whether help can be an instrument of, for example, emancipation from a given order or a form of resistance against the existing socio-economic and ideological conjuncture is a real challenge. In counselling, even if processes of emancipation and resistance unfold at the individual level, they more often than not result in the eponymous reproduction of the social (dis)order. This is why the title of this paper highlights the unintended consequences of counselling. Besides, this kind of reflection could be a voice in the ongoing debate on agency (Parker, 2000) as an attempt to inquire whether it is possible to accomplish social change

by supporting individuals and if so, how this change could be launched. Another interesting point to consider is how counselling can encourage the development of *the individual of resistance* (Kargulowa, 2015 after Potulicka & Rutkowiak, 2010) if participants in counselling processes as a rule try to find ways in which individuals could make themselves at home in the contemporary world as it is. Despite all these doubts, it must be stressed again that the effects of actions undertaken *by* and *for the sake of* individuals may be entirely divergent from social effects.

This having been said, counselling undoubtedly contributes to the reproduction of the contemporary social order and, as such, it must all the time be reflectively monitored (Giddens, 1984). Primarily, as critical theories and studies insist, the mechanisms which govern counselling must constantly be brought to light (Kruszelnicki, 2015). Unfortunately, critical theories and studies are a far less common fixture in counselling discourse than in the discourse on education. Although critical research into counselling has gathered some momentum in recent years (cf. Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018; Arulmani, 2010), it is still nowhere near to forming part of mainstream scholarly discourse. Given this, endeavours to expand and invigorate this kind of reflection are becoming ever more pertinent.

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