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Counselling and guidance for adults: A narrative paradigm

In this article, advisory functions in adult education, training and career development are discussed within the narrative enquiry paradigm as applied in the scholarly discipline of adult education and training. The study distinguishes two logics of the counselling function: as activity based on the logic of diagnosis and as practice mobilising various forms of narrative enquiry in order to promote self-awareness and dialogical understanding. The argument is underpinned by the experience of training delivered at the Department of Education and Training Sciences of the University of Tours.

Keywords: adult education, life history, narrative enquiry, micro-phenomenology

The functions of advising and counselling adults, regarded as emerging functions in the literature on vocational training in France in the 1990s, became central from the 2000s onwards. Their recognition by vocational training actors led to the emergence of multiple professions with the aim of supporting and securing professional careers. Mechanisms were then developed, involving approaches geared to encouraging reflexive work and reflection processes for self-orientation and the recognition of prior experience. Since 2010, ethical questions have been gradually arising about the impact of individual measures on the future of adults. Consequently, forms of collective support have become topical again, both in adult education and counselling systems and in research work in education sciences.

This article relies on a socio-historical perspective to outline and examine the rise of guidance and counselling frameworks in adult education. The study is based on the research carried out in the field of adult guidance in France from the 1990s onwards. The other kind of data contributing to the argument is derived from the examination of the structure of counselling-related training courses offered by the Department of Education and Training Sciences of the University of Tours, whose pioneering work seeks to develop an approach to counselling based on the exploration of life histories in training.

Counselling in adult education: Socio-historical perspectives

The emergence of a paradigm of support in publications on vocational training in France has followed what researchers, such as Jean-Pierre Boutinet and Pierre Dominicé (2009), have called a “deinstitutionalisation” of adult life. Boutinet’s study on adult life (1998), published after a series of his works on the anthropology of the project (1990), reveals that the reference points that once served to order the course of adult life have been systematically eroding since the post-war period. What Boutinet also shows in his *Immaturity in Adult Life* (1998) is that contemporary lives are governed by an almost permanent incertitude. Faced with a lack of reference points for organising the course of their lives, adults must learn to orient themselves, evolve professionally and anticipate vocational transitions.

Rather than concerning merely people’s work lives, the phenomenon of “deinstitutionalisation” extends onto all spheres of adult life, including marriage, family and work, and affects all ages of life (Houde, 1999). It characterises our contemporary times, which some authors describe as hypermodern or liquid (Bauman, 2006). It produces short-circuits in the logic and the dynamics of the project, which hinges on the possibility to rely on relatively stable and predictable parameters. How such processes came to be included and addressed in texts on vocational training in France can be grasped and examined in particular on the basis of successive texts of the National Interprofessional Agreements (ANI). The study carried out by Mériaux (2009) has shown the importance attributed to the terms associated with situations of incertitude in the structure of the agreements. Specifically, the term “career” has been gradually replaced by the term “career paths.” The latter appeared for the first time in the ANI of 5th December 2003. It was subsequently utilised in the ANI of 13th October 2005, which included a heading that read “securing career paths,” the expression formalising the idea of a non-secure – and therefore precarious – factors in the working lives of adults. Then, the agreement of 7th January 2009

testifies, right down to its title (“ANI on the development of lifelong learning, professionalisation and securing career paths”), to the central place that the notion of career paths now occupies in the reference framework of continuing training policies. The fact that the term “pathway” appears 48 times (!) in the text of the agreement clearly shows the signatories’ desire to restore meaning and a socially endorsed object to the vocational training system criticised for its opacity and complexity (Mériaux, 2009, p. 15).

This semantic analysis of ANIs, whose function is to formalise the framework of the legal texts that regulate the logic and systems of vocational training in France, can be complemented by the study of the frameworks implemented: training plans, the system for the recognition of vocational experience, the individual right to training, skill assessment, the system for the validation of prior learning experience, etc. Among these measures, the skill assessment system, which was given

legal effect in France in 1991, helps adults to reflect on and examine their prospects for professional development. The counselling function within the framework of skill assessment was originally entrusted to psychologists, whose expertise based on diagnostic logic was known from the practice of school counselling. At the same time, other approaches were developed, in particular using narrative and biographical instruments. In contrast to the guidance systems which abide by diagnostic logic, the narrative approaches used in counselling were designed to support adults in deliberation and decision-making with a view to self-orientation.

The advisory function: From the diagnosis to the narrative

Defining counselling functions involves considering attitudes adopted by counsellors. The definition of a professional attitude proposed by Chauvet articulates two dimensions:

“In the following remarks, we will consider an attitude in its two necessarily interrelated dimensions: a conception of one’s role, which subsumes the aims of the service and the respective roles of the professional and the client, and behaviour and professional practices corresponding (or not) to this conception of work” (2012, p. 133).

The former dimension concerns counsellors’ ideas of their function, profession and, more operationally, the aims pursued in concrete work situations. The latter dimension concerns the reality of counsellors’ practice, i.e. the interventions through which their intentions are executed in professional situations.

This definition makes it possible to differentiate various aspects characteristic of the counselling function in adult education. One of such aspects concerns the aims of counsellors, that is, the concrete effects which they seek to generate when intervening and providing guidance to a person or a group. When examining this aspect of counselling, the focus is on counsellors’ intentions, conceived as their professional conceptions and values. Chauvet’s studies with skill assessment counsellors have led him to distinguish two types of the targeted effects: diagnosis and reflexivity. This distinction helps capture both intentions and conceptions of the profession and associated practices. It includes a practical dimension through the logic of categorization it generates between practices that favour diagnostic aims and those whose main purpose is to encourage reflexive and deliberative work. Admittedly, these categories are not ontologically present in work situations, yet they do make it possible to structure indicators for defining professional styles in order to conceptualise advisory functions in adult education and training.

The definition of diagnosis offered in the *Historical Dictionary of the French Language* (2012) reads: “a prospective condition resulting from an in-depth examination of a critical situation.” In medicine, the practice of diagnosis presupposes

knowing how to identify signs and symptoms in order to proceed with the “demarcation of the healthy and the pathological” (Lemoine, 2017, p. 21). In medical practice, this capability of identification and distinction is based on knowledge from experimental sciences, which are themselves developed on the basis of extensive and systematic protocols designed to determine the processes that organise the supposed causal relationships among the phenomena observed, to draw conclusions and thus to formulate prognoses of further evolution. In the field of adult education, these models have spread particularly in the practice of assessment (Aubret & Blanchard, 2005). They tacitly organise the practice of counsellors with the background in psychology (Guichard & Huteau, 2006). A structural examination of relational dynamics in support situations governed by diagnostic logic reveals asymmetrical relationships on the basis of which respective positions are established in these situations. Indeed, as already stated, carrying out a diagnosis presupposes having the requisite knowledge to identify favourable or unfavourable signs, to classify the factors and resources deemed necessary for a guidance project, to predict and estimate the chances of success of a given approach, etc. Based on the rational calculation and estimation of probabilities, this logic places the counsellor in the position of an expert. If this situation is partly rooted in the context of medical practice and linked to patients’ relative or temporary inability to know how to interpret the signs and symptoms they are experiencing in order to name the issue that affects them, it must be analysed with regard to counselling for adults. Indeed, the logic of diagnosis generates various forms of dependency and induces the sense of relative incapacity, whether temporary or lasting, in people who, voluntarily or on recommendation, turn to a counsellor in order to transform their actual or anticipated situation.

Parallel to this logic of advice, based on an expert scrutiny and engendering asymmetrical positions in guidance relationships, an alternative movement has developed, promoting attitudes rooted in a hermeneutic paradigm of thinking and speaking in the first and second person (Breton, 2019a). From the counsellor’s point of view, the aim is to guide the expression of counselees’ experiences so as to foster a reflexive examination of their presuppositions. As such counselling practices are driven by reflexive reciprocity (Denoyel, 2013), dialogical co-interpretation (Pineau, 1998) and dialogical deliberation (Lhotellier, 2001), they break with the asymmetrical positions that characterise counselling practices structured by diagnostic logic. Instead, they mobilise a range of narrative interventions, the effects of which further the work of the elucidation and clarification of possibilities (Breton, 2015) and of making sense of and harnessing one’s agentivity (Pineau & Marie-Michèle, 1983). This perspective was formalised in a pioneering way by the University of Tours’ Department of Education and Training Sciences, which was then headed by Gaston Pineau, a co-founder of the “*récits de vie en formation*” approach (Pineau & Legrand, 2007), as part of the Diplôme d’études supérieures spécialisées Fonctions d’accompagnement en formation (DESS FAC).

Training counsellors in adult education and training: The example of the Department of Education and Training Sciences of the University of Tours

Since its establishment in 1985 by Professor of Educational Sciences Gaston Pineau, the Department of Education and Training Sciences of the University of Tours has been providing training for adults with the aim of recognising experiential learning acquired as a result of their involvement in problematic situations in everyday life. In this context, a paradigm called experiential training was given formal outlines in a collected volume edited by Gaston Pineau and Bernadette Courtois in 1991. In his contribution, Pineau defined experiential training on the basis of its two fundamental phases:

“we define experiential training as training through direct but reflexive contact. Through direct contact, i.e. without any mediation, whether of a trainer, a programme, a book, a screen or even of words, and therefore without delay, on the spot, at least at its genesis” (Pineau, 1991, p. 29).

The first stage of transformative learning, according to Pineau, is the immediate experience of a difficulty. The second results from the gradual integration of the event into the course of life and from reflection on the event, which makes it possible to become aware of the nature and formative effects of this difficulty. If the first stage is that of a trial through which the subject passes, the second is that of reflexive work and of engaging in dialogue within the community of the event experienced.

The progressive inclusion of experiential training, self-study (Moisan & Carré, 2002) and experiential learning (Balleux, 2000) in adult education systems raises questions about counselling practices in adult education. As early as in 1984, Pineau posed the problem in an article entitled “Sauve qui peut! Life enters into lifelong learning. What a story!” The issue stated in the article is that adults who enrol in training courses are the bearers of learning and achievements which must be known and recognised by the instructors in order to avoid formally teaching the knowledge that has already been acquired through experience. However, the problem is that the ways in which experiential knowledge is constituted are silent (Breton, 2017). Experiential knowledge is acquired in work situations, in the course of professional life and during learning moments that occur throughout one’s life, without one necessarily being aware of the process and its outcomes. As aptly put by Guy Jobert (2011), the problem is an enigma: knowledge gained through experience is only available in practice. It cannot be understood as an object of reflection by the subject who holds it. Such observations have led Pineau to structure MA-level training courses in order to train counsellors in methods of consciousness-raising and socialisation of experiential knowledge.

Counselling and guidance for fostering reflection on one's experience and formalisation of one's knowledge

The problems encountered by Pineau in structuring a training programme for vocational counsellors and the recognition of prior learning were both ethical and methodological. In order to grasp the ethical dimensions of counselling, it is appropriate at this stage to return to the definition of the attitude proposed by Chauvet. As already explained, the attitude combines two components: the conception of the proper practice of the counselling profession and the concrete interventions implemented in work situations. From this perspective, divergences between counsellors' conceived aims and the perceived effects of their practices in concrete support situations are a source of ethical dilemmas and conflicts. Many factors may contribute to gaps between aims and interventions. One of them is the context, which, for example, can generate levels of constraints such that certain practices are prevented. This is often the case for counsellors who have to work within the public systems that compress support times (Massip, 2015). Another factor is the mismatch between the interventions applied and the envisaged aims. This concerns, for example, counsellors who seek to support adults in transition in developing agentivity (Bédard, 1983), but who employ interventions which generate prescriptive phenomena that reduce the agility of their clients. The lack of correlation between aims and interventions must therefore be collectively observed and consciously examined. This is a necessary condition for changing practices in the context of training systems for counsellors.

It is on the basis of these insights that various training courses have been offered to skill assessment counsellors, guidance and career development counsellors and those who deal with recognition and validation of prior experience at the University of Tours. The first course to be offered was the *Diplôme d'études supérieures spécialisées Fonctions d'accompagnement en formation (DESS FAC)*, which was introduced in 1997 (Breton et al., 2015), following the adoption of the law on skill assessment in France in 1991 (Liétard, 2012). The course was specifically designed to offer counsellors a training programme based on narrative approaches and methods to professionalise adult guidance and counselling practices. This perspective, anchored in the hermeneutic paradigm, mobilises life stories and the narration of lived experience as a means of self-training. Two narrative practices have become the pivots of this MA-level training: life history in training (Pineau & Legendre, 2007) and the explanation interview (Vermersch, 1994/2000).

The narration of experiences and functions of the council: Narrative enquiry

If counselling practices structured by the logic of diagnosis presuppose an expertise based on the knowledge of the labour market and the ability to define behavioural

profiles, aptitudes and predispositions, narrative practices proceed from the logic of “holding counsel” (Lhotellier, 2001), which calls for an expertise in conducting individual and group interviews. The modes of counselling intervention based on narrative practices are structured around devices promoting the expression and reception of life stories and the formulation of questions and instructions that assist the clients’ reflexive work. These narrative practices fall within two major categories: biographical narrative and phenomenological description.

Biographical narrative is central among the devices that mobilise narrative as a means of self-formation. The development of such narratives is structured in seven main stages. The following outline comes from an article dedicated to the presentation of this approach (Breton, 2019b):

Stage 1: definition of the framework and the contract with the group: rules of group work, joint definition of the issues, confidentiality, ownership of written documents, etc.

Stage 2: individual, short and thematic narratives, based on the different directions of exploration proposed by those responsible for the system and its support: lifelines (Lainé, 2004), genealogical approaches (Lani-Bayle, 2000), etc.

Stage 3: first socialisation of each of the individual stories in sub-groups or the whole group (between fifteen and twenty people).

Stage 4: first thematisation, in the group, based on the elements common to the various stories: genealogical dimension, ages of adult life, life management, professional transition, etc. Guidance counsellors provide theoretical and methodological reference points to support the individual writing work between the sessions.

Stage 5: in-depth writing of the life story based on the key events in life, from birth on or over one or more periods of the life course.

Stage 6: socialisation of each of the life stories (thirty-minute to one-hour-long speech) in the group. The socialisation of all the stories can take between a day and a day and a half.

Stage 7: second thematisation, in the group, based on the expression of individual stories and the analysis of the experience lived by the group during the session. Three plans can then be put to work: themes related to the life course (ages, transitions, family and social determinants); themes related to work life (values, jobs, transitions, commitment, etc.); and themes related to experiential learning (transversal knowledge, professional knowledge, professional styles, time frames for acquisition, etc.).

Fig. 1. A scheme for training counsellors and adult counsellors through stories and life stories in training

Owing to this framework, the counsellors forge ethical, theoretical and methodological benchmarks for living and understanding the effects of the biographical narrative, including the effects of experience lived during the composition and expression of the narrative; the effects of understanding resulting from the reception and socialisation of the other people's narratives; the procedures for co-defining the foundations of the work to be carried out within the framework of the counselling relationship; the integration of orientation procedures for writing the narrative of oneself and one's learning moments; the mastery of thematic procedures for recognising the singularity of the narratives and their social and collective dimension.

The effects of the collective narrative contribute to the understanding of the determinants of the professional path and to the awareness of the knowledge that has been built up in the process. The application of the other category – micro-phenomenological description – is also studied and practised in the master's degree programme taught at the University of Tours:

“To describe is to put out of play the formulation of the causes of phenomena in favour of the account of what is noticed. Hence, the preference given to the “how” rather than the “why” or the “what,” i.e. to the ways of being, the modalities of presence, the qualities of the lived experience and the processes of the emergence of phenomena” (Depraz, 2014, p. 136).

This practice of description makes it possible to initiate guidance processes aimed at the detailed rendering of action in a situation. It is based on the interview techniques founded by Pierre Vermersch (2012), one of whose functions is to promote awareness of the implicit factors that organise self-perception in concrete life situations, reflection on one's possibilities of action and the structuring of self-orientation approaches.

Counselling and support through narrative enquiry

In opposition to the logic and practice of diagnosis, the purpose of consulting practices is to support a dynamic that proceeds from the performance of actions and interventions aimed at initiating first-person explorations (Depraz, 2011). While the practice of diagnosis requires that counsellors gather information on the situation of their counselees in order to advise them, the dynamic triggered by the practice of reflexive support is supposed, conversely, to help counselees inform themselves and deliberate on their situation to understand it more lucidly. Theorised by Lhotellier (2011) and technically described by Vermersch (1994/2000), this approach is based on a conversion of the point of view (Depraz, 2014), in which adults, while being counselled, examine and explore all apparently too obvious or previously unnoticed possibilities on their own. According to this logic, the focus of the examination work is shifted. Rather than a person's characteristics, behaviours and abilities, what

is examined in depth is the situation experienced and the way it is thought about by the individual experiencing it. From this perspective, the notion of the lived situation (Pesce, 2019) appears central to the approach. Indeed, the precedence is given to promoting awareness of the frameworks within which counselees interpret and understand their situation and identify and name the prior learning, which they often have without realising it. These interpretive frameworks and articulation modes determine the relevance of the construction of development scenarios and actions which can then be undertaken and for which the person will bear responsibility.

It is from this nodal point that we believe that counselling practices are pertinent to the sciences of education and adult education. Indeed, from this perspective, guidance work acquires an anthropological and metamorphic dimension: anthropological because the future of adults is shaped by various transitions, e.g. stages of life, professional transitions and changes in employment, which punctuate their evolution; and metamorphic because these transitions involve less moving across a certain distance and more transformations of lived situations, which also entail self-transformations for the adults involved. More than simple orientation work, helping practices are to be conceived from a narrative, reflexive and dialogical perspective, whose object is to foster the conscientisation of the frameworks for interpreting situations (Schütz, 1943/1987), deliberation on scenarios of evolution, the capacity to dialogue and meta-communicate on the constraints encountered and the co-construction of perspectives of development.

To accompany these reflexive dynamics, counsellors must be able to act in conformity with their wishes and, in particular, intervene by knowing how to define a framework, by creating conditions for a collective examination of lived situations and by producing language acts (Searle, 1969) which encourage attention arousal and initiate deliberate and feasible development scenarios. For counsellors, the skills to be acquired include the know-how requisite for developing counselees' lucid agentivity, based on the techniques of "narrative enquiry" (Breton, 2020), which combines the perspective of professional career in the framework of biographical interviews with the work of micro-phenomenological description, channelling the detailed exploration of lived situations in order to identify the potentials to be actualised.

Conclusion

In this article, the counselling functions in adult education, training and professional life evolution have been discussed in terms of the narrative enquiry paradigm with reference to the scholarly and disciplinary field of adult education and training. Within this framework, counselling is not dissociated from the practice of vocational education and training since counselees cannot take action without generating knowledge about themselves, their lived situations and their environments.

For this reason, we have highlighted the importance of language acts, implicitly referring to the work of Austin (1962) in order to focus on the importance of narrative practice in the process of guidance, self-orientation and self-formation.

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