



## **Responding to Diversity: Lessons for Career Guidance from the Global South**

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### **Introduction**

This paper draws on my experience and involvement in two comparative research projects on career guidance (CG) in the Mediterranean region that were carried out within ten years of each other (Sultana & Watts, 2007; Sultana, 2017). Here I highlight the main learning point from this research in the 'global South', namely, that 'context matters'. There is an increasing interest in our field in the manner in which local realities shape career. Nevertheless, there is still a tendency for many of the leading theoretical models to either privilege 'universalisms' over 'localisms', or to consider localisms as mere exotic exemplars of cultural diversity, requiring theory 'adaptation' and 'adjustment'. Instead, I approach such diversity as an opportunity to prise open spaces for critical reflection about how career guidance can serve the interests of global justice.

Such a position draws on post-colonial perspectives and 'southern epistemologies' that critique the universalising claims about knowledge we find in Euro-American narratives. These master narratives also underpin what we understand by CG, providing its core assumptions, and defining as well as guiding its interactions with society. Here I first look at some of these assumptions, with a view to troubling and further unsettling their taken-for-granted nature. I then argue that 'localisms' are not only

more likely to be relevant and useful in response to the specificity of context – they are also more likely to serve the interests of social justice.

### **'Universalisms' in Career Guidance**

Turning first to what one could call the 'language' or 'grammar' of our field. These include mainstream notions of 'career' and of 'choice' or 'life design'; the centrality and meaningfulness of work; the assumption of internal locus of control and of self-directed autonomy in making occupational choices; the unarticulated expectation to delay gratification in view of long term career planning; the bearing of sole responsibility for life outcomes; and the separation of material from spiritual considerations of being. Examples of mainstream, taken-for-granted practices that have been 'troubled' by realities in 'the global South' include the individual career interview; the predominance of discursive strategies as the pathway to problem resolution; the maintenance of professional distance (regulated, in some instances, by a monetised relationship); the emphasis on personal variables, such as interests and abilities, at the cost of considering environmental and contextual variables; and the articulation of solutions in terms of individual rather than collective action, often without reference to the spiritual dimension of life or the role of piety as a source of personal satisfaction and flourishing at work.

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CG is, in my view, still missing in-depth anthropological/ethnographic accounts that would help us understand the extent to which our theories, with their universalising tendencies, are both plain wrong, and equally, plainly dangerous. They are 'wrong' for ontological and epistemological reasons – that is, they fail to generate accounts that are more likely to reflect 'reality' and meaning as perceived, experienced and constructed by particular groups in specific contexts. They are also 'dangerous' in that they represent a threat to the ultimate aim of CG, which is to support the flourishing of others. Taking localisms seriously thus becomes a question of social justice.

### **'Localisms' and 'Southern Epistemologies'**

CG can be enriched by the work of scholars outside our field, who provide us with the theoretical tools that help us attend to the local. Among these scholars are the Portuguese political economist and global legal scholar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos; the Maori anthropologist, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and the Australian transgender sociologist, Raewyn Connell. The common thread uniting these scholars – focusing as they do on 'epistemologies of the south', 'indigenous knowledge', and 'southern theory' respectively – is their postcolonial critique and condemnation of Euro-American narratives, which they represent as being universalist, exploitative, dominatory and predatory. Mainstream theoretical models, in the view of these authors, are created in the image of the economic system that spawned: imperialist capitalism. They highlight the fact that it is not only the distribution of wealth and power that is structurally skewed towards the 'global North': so too is the global production of knowledge. The relations of authority, peripheralisation, exclusion and appropriation are not just cultural or economic, but intellectual as well. In contrast to these universalising traditions, these authors contemplate the kinds of knowledges that could emerge from the 'global South', if the 'global South' were empowered to speak, and especially if these acts of 'speech' were to dialogue

among each other in order to make it clear that 'another world is possible'.

An important aspect of 'southern epistemologies' is that they shake our cocky self-confidence when we throw about the terms and tools of our trade. They raise questions about the capacity of that which has been legitimised as 'career theory' to explain the world in ways that have 'universal' validity. They also foreground the fact that the 'global North' has historically imposed 'scientific' knowledge as superior to other forms of knowledge that are valued in the 'global South', making such knowledge part of its strategy of domination.

### **Implications for Career Guidance**

This has important implications for CG. Those who take up the challenges posed by southern theory seriously are compelled to manifest an increasing awareness of the intimate and intricate relationships between every aspect of their work and the exercise of power. When we become more attuned to the mutual imbrication of knowledge with power, we will also become more adept at confronting such questions as: Whose ways of seeing, and of interpreting, count? What kinds of 'truths' are created and validated by my action? In whose interests do such 'regimes of truth' work? Which forms of being are valued by my approach to CG? Which remain invisible, unacknowledged, disregarded?

These and similar questions and perspectives are slowly starting to make inroads in our field. We are increasingly seeing such 'epistemological reflexivity', which serves to critically interrogate not only the positionality of researchers, but the very research questions we ask. I am here thinking of Marcelo Ribeiro and his Latin American colleagues, for instance (Ribeiro et al, 2015), who draw on culturally grounded indigenous worldviews, liberation psychology, critical social theory, and social justice perspectives in their efforts to reconceptualise the field and to make it meaningful in a different regional context. Linda Reid has explored the

cultural specificity of Maori concepts, constructs and experiences to explain career processes for indigenous communities in Aotearoa. In South Africa, and elsewhere on that continent, a number of colleagues are infusing career guidance with Ubuntu, the Zulu philosophy that stresses that a person is only a person through other people, in other words, that “I am because you are”. In Asia, Gideon Arulmani has worked hard to develop generative conversations between Euro-American approaches and more indigenously Indian ones, also thanks to his stewardship of the *Indian Journal of Career and Livelihood Planning*.

This growing corpus of work on CG in the global South, informed as it is by indigenous and subaltern knowledge, represents what de Sousa Santos calls a ‘sociology of emergences’. They are efforts from below, striving to build up grounded and context-sensitive and context-responsive knowledge that generates an emancipatory way of being and acting. These are incipient insights which our guidance community needs to attend to, to treasure, and to learn from – not to appropriate and domesticate, but to see in them “signs, clues, and latent tendencies that, however inchoate and fragmented, point to new constellations of meaning as regards both the understanding and the transformation of the world” (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p.10).

## Conclusion

Context matters when it comes to thinking through the meaning and relevance of CG as a social practice. There is a need to ground CG approaches in the specificities of economic, social and cultural realities. The international CG community needs to become more reflexive about the way Euro-American master narratives about concepts central to CG constitute ‘regimes of truth’ situated within particular cultural and social systems that do not brook the possibility of coexistence with other forms of knowledge, and other ways of ‘being in the world’. They thus have had – and continue to have – a harmful impact on the subjectivities of colonised/neo-colonised subjects, and need to be decolonised.

Such a realisation signals the need to open up discursive spaces that bridge current global divides and inequities in the production of knowledge, also by amplifying multiple voices, by accommodating indigenous practices, by developing conceptual and methodological approaches that capture and understand the creativity emerging at the periphery and semi-periphery, and by creating the conditions for new perspectives to emerge from mutual learning between different frameworks, traditions and knowledge projects, where both scientific and lay knowledge can coexist. In drawing attention to such ‘localisms’ and ‘particularisms’, this paper has hopefully contributed to the dialogue that makes such mutual learning possible.

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### About the author

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