



Inclusive Career Counselling for Individuals with Incarceration Experience: Opportunities and Barriers

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Abstract

The escalating vulnerabilities arising from the instability and unpredictability of contemporary life underscore the crucial social and inclusive role of guidance. Serving as a tool to diminish inequalities, broaden opportunities for all individuals, and deconstruct stereotypes and stigmatization that often confine certain social groups to marginalized occupational niches, guidance provides a platform for people to articulate their unique qualities and diversity. In the last years, the most updated career counselling frameworks have provided insights that help practitioners respond to situations that are characterised by complexity. Such approaches stress that social and economic contexts matter and that it is impossible to promote the career human agency of diverse populations without considering the dynamic interplay between cultural, contextual, and psychosocial factors in the life design process. Within these frameworks, the need to move towards qualitative procedures is emphasised, especially for recipients or in situations where standardisation - of the method, stimuli, and evaluation - is not helpful because it would mean losing relevant information linked to uniqueness. The present contribution will share some reflections on the opportunities and the barriers arising from the interventions involving persons with imprisonment experience, aimed at understanding the dynamics of the career development in this field. We aim to identify strengths and weaknesses that could serve as starting points for career counsellors dealing with these distinctive and challenging clients.

Keywords: career counselling, career education, prisoners, job inclusion, vulnerability conditions

Introduction

Being in a vulnerable condition means, in most cases, being socially excluded, having reduced participation in a productive life, and having limited social relationships. This in turn, leads to a reduction in opportunities and amplification of threats and challenges. The members of socially vulnerable groups are in danger of

social exclusion if attention concerning their professional and social integration is not provided (Vlachadi & Chronopoulou, 2022). When the vulnerable condition derives from regrettable behaviours perceived as intentional, the stigmatisation is authorised and legitimised. Persons with imprisonment experience belong to this type of vulnerable group; people feel no pity for them; people are convinced that 'they had it coming', so no help or support

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is needed. Wahidin (2002) conceptualised the experience of imprisonment as prison time 'inscribed' on the body to express the incarnation of the stigma, exactly as a tattoo.

Persons with imprisonment experience, even though they belong to this particular type of vulnerable condition, after having served their sentences, need to be reintegrated back into society (Chen & Shields, 2020) and need to find a job for the same reasons as everyone else: to be included in the community, to actively contribute to society, to support themselves and their families, pursue life goals (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). The more smoothly this reintegration occurs, the more the society will benefit from these ex-offenders' healthy and productive contributions if they have successfully transformed their lives to become part of the general citizen group. Unfortunately, staying out of prison is extremely challenging for persons with imprisonment experience. Recent US statistics indicate that more than 600,000 people are released yearly from state and federal prisons and 9 million from municipal or county jails (Flynn, 2022). Within three years, two-thirds of persons with imprisonment experience are rearrested, with more than 50% reincarcerated; up to 89% of formerly incarcerated persons (FIPs) who are re-arrested are unemployed; FIPs are 10 times more likely to be homeless than non-FIPs (Benecchi, 2021). Employment inclusion is a core part of social inclusion and is the keystone to contributing to the decrease in the high rate of recidivism reoffending for people leaving the prison system; FIPs must be able to obtain employment that is considered high-quality, stable, and long-term. This has proven difficult as research has found that unemployment rates for this group are five times higher than those of general population (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). The low employment and activity rates of ex-offenders suggest that significant barriers exist for FIPs to access the labour market (Flynn, 2022).

Barriers to Job Inclusion

Social inclusion, whose main step is job inclusion, can be affected by a range of complicated issues and factors related to the individuals, their career-related issues, and their social perception and representation as a social category. As previously underlined, being labelled as a person with imprisonment experience, or FIP, recalls a series of negative attributes encompassed in the concept of stigma (Feingold, 2021).

Link and Phelan (2001), conceptualising the stigma, identify a series of interrelated and convergent components. To begin with, individuals perceive and label differences among human beings; furthermore, dominant cultural beliefs link these assigned differences with negative characteristics or unfavourable stereotypes; thirdly, based on these stereotypes, assigned individuals are categorised as 'the other', separated from 'ourselves'; as a result, fourthly, 'the other' experiences a decrease in social status and suffers from discrimination and unequal outcomes. Thus, the process of stigmatisation occurs when "elements of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). The responses to stigma depend on how the stigma is internalised: Campbell and Deacon (2006) posited that even in the absence of explicit discrimination, individuals may internalise unfavourable perceptions, thereby influencing the likelihood of challenging or addressing their marginalised status. For example, Moran (2012) underlined that studies of ex-inmate participation in the labour market highlight the problem of stigmatisation of former prisoners – the so-called 'prison effect' – whose focus is on the impacts of methods of formal disclosure of a criminal past, such as criminal records checking (e.g., Weiman, 2007), rather than on the subjective judgement of individuals based on their competences, interests, and so on. In a recent review, Feingold (2021) emphasised the disadvantages FIPs face

once they re-enter the community. FIPs are more likely to experience unemployment, poverty, and homelessness (Apel & Sweeten, 2010; Moschion & Johnson, 2019) and psychological impairment (Cutcher et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2016). The stigma associated with incarceration can be considered the most crucial cause of the social inequities that FIPs experience (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; Tyler & Brockmann, 2017); it is shown at different levels (Link & Phelan, 2001; Tyler & Brockmann, 2017), encompassing both formal and informal aspects (Petersilia, 2001). The formal aspects are related to the restrictive provisions instituted within laws or regulations; at a structural level, individuals with a criminal record may be excluded from employment opportunities, restricted in their housing options, deprived of accessing specific public benefits and of their fundamental civil rights (Alexander, 2012; American Bar Association, 2018). The informal aspects refer to the impact of former incarceration on the evaluation of individuals by employers, landlords, and other relevant parties (Goger, Harding, & Henderson, 2021); at a social level, besides stereotypes, they have to deal with some common attitudes that assume that FIPs are dangerous, dishonest, lazy, or unintelligent (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010). More recently, Donaldson and Viera (2021) have highlighted the detrimental effects of the obligation for disclosure of conviction histories on job application: according to Pager's (2003) studies, employers discriminate against individuals with conviction histories even when their educational background and work history matches that of other applicants.

The Role of Career Counselling

The emerging and existent vulnerabilities necessarily call to mind the social and inclusive dimension of career guidance as a device to reduce inequalities, to broaden the range of opportunities for the benefit of all people, to deconstruct stereotypes and stigmatisation that tend to relegate certain social categories to ghettoising job niches, to provide the opportunity for people to give

voice to their distinctiveness and diversity. Career counselling is called to take responsibility for the aims of sustainable development, specifically the ones related to the reduction of inequalities, the rise of basic standards of living, and the fostering of equitable social development and inclusion; it is a device to promote social justice (Hooley & Sultana, 2016).

As a complex context at risk of perpetuating structural injustices and vulnerability conditions, the justice system greatly demands career support intervention. The justice system can represent a privileged environment for vocational and educational guidance to facilitate the expression of career needs where they have less chance of emerging in persons most at risk of disinvestment from educational paths and work, resulting in undignified work. Robertson (2022) in his literature review on career development in criminal justice contexts, underlines that despite a critical gap in scientific studies on the effectiveness of inmate career development support interventions, their relevance can be surely argued as some studies have highlighted how they address an unmet career support need by the justice system (Itai & Gilliet, 2015).

Furthermore, "it is necessary not only to offer any employment opportunity but to guide the person towards an informed choice by encouraging the client to take on an active role at the end of the prison sentence" (Maiorano, 2015, p. 11); therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the experimentation of career support intervention aimed at promoting social reintegration. According to Chen and Shields (2020), people who have been incarcerated generally experience four main issues in securing a job: (1) lack of employability skills; (2) limited job opportunities; (3) negative career attitudes; (4) lack of motivation to search for and obtain a position in their chosen field. Furthermore, many inmates do not have a basic education, which is essential for accessing sustainable employment both before and after detention, and illiteracy, associated with an almost non-existent

professional history, represents an important risk factor in finding a job and being employed. According to recent literature (Anker et al., 2003; Fitzgerald et al., 2013; Place et al., 2000; Chen & Shields, 2020), professional interventions with this target could influence and favour the opportunities of accessing productive work, characterised by the principles and the conditions of decent work: freedom, equity, security, and respect for human rights. Moreover, career counselling increases prisoners' ability to explore and identify career interests, occupational options, job search skills, goal setting, problem-solving and career awareness skills, reducing the probability of reoffending recidivism (Fitzgerald et al., 2013; Place et al., 2000). Furthermore, the importance that work holds in favouring the socio-occupational reintegration of prisoners is widely recognised in the panorama of theories that try to explain the motivations that drive people to commit crimes.

Methodological Approaches to Career Counselling with FIPs

In the last ten years, career guidance experts have transitioned towards more comprehensive and sophisticated paradigms that recognise the multi-level interplay between individuals, groups, and societal environments in the pursuit of advancing life-career development (Sultana, 2022). Making an effective career plan requires qualified career guidance that uses a tailor-made approach, avoids pre-packaged solutions, and focuses on individual and contextual resources and (real and perceived) barriers. Of course, the flexibility of methods and tools must be combined with theoretical-methodological rigour to establish the choice of tools and their interpretation.

The motivations behind criminal behaviour are rooted in personal histories and experiences that are unique and not easily generalized. Identifying and analysing these motivations necessitate a highly individualized approach. It is essential to adopt a methodological model

that begins with the personal narrative, enabling individuals in prison to articulate and reconstruct their personal and career stories. This approach should provide room for expressing fears, concerns, both real and perceived barriers, as well as the influences from the past, present, and envisioned future. The very recent career counselling paradigms have provided insights to practitioners to make sense of and respond to situations highly marked by complexity. Awareness of such complexity has generated theoretical frameworks encompassing the multi-level interaction between individuals, groups, and social contexts to promote life-career development (Sultana, 2022). Constructivist (and storied) approaches (Savickas, 2015) could be particularly effective and powerful, especially for those clients or in those situations where standardisation is not helpful because it would mean losing relevant information related to uniqueness. Based on qualitative procedures, constructivist approaches increase the potential for comprehending the 'other', working actively with the clients through the dynamic process of construction, reconstruction, and co-construction of personal life stories. The System Theory Framework (STF) (McMahon & Patton, 2002; Patton & McMahon, 1999) provides adequate theoretical and methodological support to customize the career counselling process according to the needs of special clients, such as inmates. From the STF's perspective, a person should be considered a person-in-context. The interactions within and among these systems are dynamic and framed in the context of past, present, and future times. So, career counsellors are called to give space to the complexity of individual stories, to emphasise the dynamic and interacting nature of the map of personal systems of influences in individuals' lives and to refer to the meanings that those individuals assign to their stories. Using narratives and focusing on clients' stories has been proven to help develop a new, more adaptive, and positive narrative for their lives (Cochran, 1997; Chen & Shield, 2020; Zarbo et al., 2023).

The career counselling interventions based on these approaches should be managed with caution, as they require expertise in taking care of persons and in managing vulnerabilities; a potential risk factor is the lack of adequate professional guidance for prisoners (Makurane, 2020; Shivy et al., 2019) and of adequately trained professionals in the justice system. Therefore, the way counsellors guide these professional development paths can transform them into potential pitfalls for career success. In the absence of adequately trained professionals and the implementation of structured career counseling or education initiatives, there is a risk that within the justice system, work and training may inadvertently function as containment mechanisms (Patrizi et al., 2016). In this way, they can become a transmission belt for injustices and stereotypes both for young and adults. Therefore, the main challenge in the justice system is ensuring offenders' interventions of social reintegration that could provide the possibility of accessing training and professional careers that do not further bind them to paths of low prestige and social recognition.

Career counselling represents a privileged way to minimise the impact of the consequences of imprisonment and foster the labour inclusion of prisoners since it works on the reconstruction, re-elaboration, and retelling of one's past events, focusing on their present experiences and imagining future perspectives relating to one's life and career trajectories. Therefore, prison is an 'incapacitating' context on an individual and social level (Patrizi, 2011, p. 233) and produces strong effects on individuals:

- a. **Loss of social role.** Living the prison experience - rigidly punctuated time, loss of private communication, the constant presence of custody - leads the person back to a single role: offender. This meaning obscures other spheres of the person's life that should represent the elements on which to reset a different future perspective.
- b. **Prisonisation.** A process of assimilation and identification with prison's social customs and norms. Martin (2018) states that leaving prison is like a sudden change of social position, in which people with deeply rooted prison habits and dispositions are confronted with new patterns of everyday life. The contrast between identification in prison and the new life can hinder social functioning and amplify exclusion from the labour market and other institutions.
- c. **Effects of imprisonment.** Zimbardo (2001) highlighted that assigning labels to people generates reactions that debase their humanity and lower their sense of self-worth and capacity to participate in the community. Among other consequences of imprisonment, some seem particularly relevant to the specific work of professional counselling, e.g., the severe reduction of interest or participation in meaningful activities and the loss of future prospects (Patrizi, 2011). Furthermore, the prison institution eliminates individual differences. Everyday personal habits, personal needs, desires and requirements are replaced by others that are hetero-induced and more consistent with the institution's goals (Patrizi, 2011).

A Research Agenda Proposal

Even though there is a scarcity of studies examining the impacts of career counselling programs on FIPs, several useful insights could be provided by some specific experiences, such as the California State University (CSU) Project Rebound (Fox & Rodriguez, 2022); nonetheless, there exist several promising and abundant avenues for future research. Further studies, considering the effects of imprisonment, should focus on studying the psycho-social variables and resources that can be the most useful in productively reconstructing personal and social identities. Other aspects of the research

should focus on the most decisive variables to

- a. improve the process of career decision-making and the quality of life in the career pathways;
- b. identify the protective factors to avoid undignified jobs;
- c. minimise the risk of reoffending.

This should include developing and validating specific career guidance interventions, the effectiveness of which should be tested in longitudinal studies. Quali-quantitative instruments should be developed that respect the specific vulnerable status of persons to improve the career management skills of prisoners. Another crucial aspect is related to gender differences: the debate on gender-specific barriers for women (Donaldson & Viera, 2021) confirms that women with imprisonment experience face additional barriers that are complex and intersected with other factors that affect their ability to seek and secure employment (i.e., lack of adequate job skills, or insufficient job skills training), perceiving the criminal record as the most pervasive and paramount of the barriers they face when seeking employment (Morris, Sumner, & Borja, 2008); starting from the suggestions coming from recent projects, i.e., the Project PROVE an in-prison career development program, designed for female offenders (Chen & Shields, 2020), further research could be focused on career development aimed at specifically supporting women. Finally, last but not least, the focus on the specific training of

professionals: developing good tools is not enough, as doing intervention-research research-intervention in prison requires specific preparation concerning the life stories of prisoners and their human dignity. Both in terms of tools and interventions, specific attention must be paid to minors who have encountered the justice system. This requires greater sensitivity and expertise as their identity is evolving, and the risk of the power of labelling is greater, representing a risk factor for the consolidation of a deviant career. Moreover, as far as minors and young adults are concerned, career support would also be a form of social justice “restoration”: recent studies show that there are systemic injustices that lead to inequalities in incarceration, for example, people with marginalized identities are over-represented in prisons (people of color, people with disabilities, people with mental health symptoms, people on low incomes, people with LGBTQ+ identities), making these people more vulnerable in education and employment pathways (Zhavoronkova, Preston, Schweitzer, & Amaning, 2023)

Hence, it is crucial to enhance the skills and sensitivity of career counsellors when working with clients with special needs. This involves assisting them in developing a self-image based on their potential, resources, and strengths. Additionally, it includes expanding their perception of available choices, enhancing their outlook on the future, minimizing the influence of perceived barriers and obstacles, and restoring a sense of identity, belonging, and human dignity.

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