Aims and issues in guidance counselling (1)

Introduction: Background, context and aims of guidance counselling

In industrialised countries, guidance counselling professions came into being at the beginning of the 20th century. At that time guidance took the form of psychological analysis; its purpose was to assist the transition from school to work. The predominant model was that of matching young people individually to a type of occupation, essentially on the basis of their aptitudes. The counsellor was an expert in psychological techniques who sought to convince the client of the soundness of his advice.

Nowadays the practice of guidance counselling is very different and far more varied. In the first place it no longer confines itself to coping with the passage from school to the world of work. Lifelong guidance is the byword. It begins while a young person is still at school and operates in two ways – by assigning pupils to different streams within the school system and through various educational activities designed to prepare pupils for choosing a career and mapping out their life. At the same time, guidance is seen as a collection of ways and means of assisting adults to cope with the various transitions occurring throughout their life.

Secondly, current guidance practice tends to have a broader focus than merely choosing and finding employment and coping with transitions. The emphasis nowadays is on what Donald Super (1980) referred to as the ‘life-span, life space approach to career development’ and hence on creating a dynamic link between different social roles. Thirdly, counsellors in general tend to adopt a less directive stance than was formerly the case. They take as their guiding principle that it is the client who has to decide: their objective is to help the client address as thoroughly as possible the task of choosing an occupational route and defining priorities for personal development.

Fourthly, the client is seen as an individual who goes on developing throughout life and is capable of acquiring new competences on the basis of personal experience. We now talk of ‘qualifying organisations’, ‘validating acquired knowledge and skills’, and ‘skills auditing’. Finally, the demarcation between vocational training and guidance has become blurred. Guidance education in its various forms is accorded increasing space in school curricula in the wealthier countries and provided as often by teachers as by trained counsellors. Some continuing training courses combine the provision of general education or instruction in occupational skills with activities designed to help trainees formulate their personal or career objectives.

This evolution in the practice of guidance counselling would seem to have been triggered by the evolving conditions under which it is given. Understanding the changes, assessing the relevance of each at a given moment and attempting to predict their further development requires that they be placed within wider social change. An analysis of this kind may be performed at three levels, namely the general ideological background that determines how we formulate certain problems, the contributory influence of the economic, technical, social and scientific contexts, and the aims and objectives that implicitly or explicitly underlie counselling practice.

Guidance counselling has changed considerably since the early 20th century, due to changes in work organisation and new conceptions of what constitute vocational qualifications. However, counselling practice is also influenced by a number of theoretical models used for research purposes and by its ethical, political and social objectives. Apart from the fact that the social sciences nowadays adopt a different view of the human subject from that generally used as the basis for counselling, the purposes of counselling in practice are less than clear. The author suggests that in the present world context it might be appropriate to review counselling practice and to replace the aim currently central to guidance counselling: rather than assisting each person individually to realise her or his full potential as a separate individual, the aim should be to assist each individual to realise his or her own human potential by helping others to do the same.

(1) This paper includes a number of points discussed in J. Guichard and M. Huteau. Psychologie de l’Orientation. Paris: Dunod, 2000.
1 The general ideological background

Four factors of an ideological nature help to determine our current concept of how guidance should be conducted in practice. These are: focusing on the client, assuming that the client is responsible for his or her own development, the central role of work in establishing identity and allowing for social integration, and our perception of the future as uncertain and unstable.

1.1 Focusing on the client

Édouard Toulouse (1903) and Alfred Binet (1908), the first psychologists to lay the foundations for vocational guidance counselling in France, made no distinction between individual and social problems. Binet for example considered that vocational guidance should contribute towards the construction of a society ‘in which each works according to his recognised ability so that no portion of physical effort is lost to society’. For these two authors the creation of a fair and just social order constituted the raison d'être for vocational guidance.

Frank Parsons (1909), on the other hand, known as the father of vocational guidance in the United States, saw things somewhat differently. His view was closer to the ideological framework enshrining counselling practice today. For Parsons guidance counselling should centre on the individual client, with society’s needs taking second place. Society is seen, to quote the title of the book by Norbert Elias (1987, 1991), as a ‘society of individuals’.

1.2 Find out what you want to be and develop yourself

Nowadays we tend to look on people more as autonomous individuals responsible for and capable of independence vis-a-vis their specific environment. This leads us to see personal development as a kind of basic moral imperative: ‘Develop yourself’.

1.3 Achieve self-fulfilment and social integration through work

We also believe that engaging in some kind of work is a particularly effective way of achieving self-development. ‘Development through self-fulfilment in one’s work’ would appear to be the chief way of viewing existence in the rich countries in the 20th century. Of course this principle is not unanimously accepted. In the first half of the century it referred particularly to men and boys. Today high unemployment in many of the wealthier countries and the emergence of new forms of poverty have led to some people becoming ‘excluded’ and their employability questioned, casting doubt on the principle of identifying an individual in terms of his or her job.

The critical unemployment situation during the 1970s has been described by a number of authors, including Jeremy Rifkin (1995, 1996), Dominique Méda (1995) and Bernard Perret (1995), as marking the beginning of an era in which the number of jobs steadily declined under the combined influence of technological advance and economic globalisation. As a result, they claimed, many people inevitably found themselves out of a job or forced to work part-time. Work thus forfeited its central role. Dominique Méda (1997) pointed out that work ‘has not always been associated with the concept of value creation, transforming one’s personality, self-realisation etc.’ and that ‘it is not the principal way in which people become socially integrated’. What Rifkin terms ‘the end of work’ would therefore make it ‘a disappearing value’ (Méda). Viewed in this perspective and over the longer term, individuals always need help – probably today more than ever – but vocational guidance as we know it is losing its meaning.

Despite the changes to which work is subject, however, we can hardly consider it just another form of activity destined to become of minor importance. The findings of Dominique Méda and others notwithstanding, Yves Clot considers that what makes work fundamentally different from other non-work activities is that it is structurally impersonal and to a degree impartial. Work, he suggests, represents a break between an individual’s personal ‘pre-occupations’ and the ‘occupations’ required of him by society. “These alone enable him to participate in an exchange whose location and function are defined independently of the participating individuals at any given moment”
In Clot’s view, it is precisely because work no longer occupies a person’s almost entire life and no longer constitutes an obligatory activity resulting from the circumstances of his birth – as in a rural society, where sons succeed their fathers as a matter of course – that it now holds a more central place in an individual’s existence. It has become “the object of a new need for self-realisation which drawing much of its vitality from non-working instances” (Clot, 1999, p.71).

1.4 An unstable future

Our manner of perceiving guidance counselling and what it involves is also determined by our view of likely future developments. We see the future as uncertain and unstable. A number of contemporary authors, such as Riverin-Simard (1996), Boutinet (1998) and Dubar (2000), stress that from now on working patterns will show not so much career development as occupational chaos with much less continuity in the sense, say, of progress to increasingly skilled jobs in a single firm or sector of industry. People are now faced more often with interruptions in their career that are paralleled by events in their personal life: families are becoming less stable; moving to other regions becomes more frequent. Such breaks have been generally designated ‘transitions’. Henceforth, therefore, as Denis Pelletier and Bernadette Dumora (1984, p.28) point out, vocational guidance counselling will necessarily involve teaching clients “strategies for the shorter term” and “how to cope with successive adjustments”.

2 The contexts

While ideology influences the way in which guidance counselling is conceived, the social context also plays its part. Three such environments seem to me to play a fundamental role here: on the one hand, the way in which work and training are organised, and on the other, the scientific considerations that influence the way in which they are modelled.

2.1 Work organisation, qualification and guidance

In an article published in 1995 that has lost none of its relevance, Alain Touraine described three forms of work organisation that emerged in the course of the 20th century, to each of which corresponds a particular conception of vocational qualification. Guidance counselling seems to have been strongly influenced by all three of these, and as a consequence can be classified under three main headings – to which we can add a fourth, more recent, type of guidance counselling, linked to growing job insecurity.

2.1.1 Occupationally focused work organisation and guidance counselling

At the beginning of the century work organisation was mainly occupationally based. Production was more in the line of craft trades: a worker needed to have the right knowhow and possessed a fund of knowledge and skills acquired through a generally lengthy and systematic apprenticeship. Skills were specific in that the worker could be identified as a mechanic or a joiner, just as at the professional level a person is a lawyer or a doctor. The craft trade was a major constituent of an individual’s identity.

Being lengthy, apprenticeship was also expensive. Choosing an occupation was a serious matter to be seriously undertaken. Advice was available from a counsellor trained in psychological techniques. The main consideration was aptitude for the job. The counsellor’s task was to foresee as objectively as possible the occupation for which a young person should be trained and in which he would work for the rest of his or her life. The ‘psychological guidance test’ provided the prototype for guidance counselling.

2.1.2 Fordism and job-directed guidance counselling

The notion of trade or craft and occupationally focused guidance based on aptitude came under critical scrutiny in many sectors of industry as a result of the innovative work organisation of Taylor and Ford, who drew on Taylor’s principles. The result of the new form of work organisation was that many people could no longer claim to have a trade, merely a job. Qualification took on a new meaning, being no longer something possessed by an individual or defined by the skills a person possessed, but related directly to the job (Dubar, 1996, p. 182). Hence-
forth it was the technical specifications of the machines (arduous? complex?) that determined the job qualification.

Under the Fordist form of work organisation ‘the hard core of skills acquisition was on-the-job training’ (Dubas, 1998, p.166). A worker was no longer able to identify himself solely in terms of craft or trade. At best he was a production hand, a machine operator. If he changed employer his qualifications could be questioned. In this case, according to Dubas, the main identifying factor was the bond between the individual and his fellow-workers, who constituted a real occupational community with its own jargon and own informal standards.

The observations of Paul Willis (1977, 1978), who studied steelworkers in the Midlands, typically illustrate the specific traits of the occupational identity in this particular industry. The workers’ identity was based on a marked sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – those employed on the shopfloor who knew what it was all about and the rest, the ‘softies’. Virility was considered of prime importance. The steelworkers were proud to be doing a ‘real job’ that demanded strength and stamina, unlike the office workers and others doing ‘women’s work’. This sense of identity was experienced daily when work in the melting shop was organised by the foremen who gave their formal instructions jokingly in the works’ own jargon in a manner designed to remind the men of the group’s standards and values – what Paul Willis summarised in the term ‘shop-floor culture’.

In this type of context guidance counselling lost its occupational focus. Personal aptitude was no longer the central point of interest. What became important was to ascertain whether a young man was likely to fit in well in the working environment, whether he would see himself as part of the team and whether he already shared the values of his fellow workers or could be brought to do so. Although guidance counsellors do not appear to have thought the subject through systematically, the Fordist form of work organisation considerably weakened the link between an individual and his occupation compared with the occupationally focused approach that still underlay the tools (mainly interest questionnaires) used by counsellors – who referred to themselves as ‘vocational guidance counsellors’ – and whose significance, apparently, was only that accepted by the counsellors themselves. The job-focus was indeed based more on considerations of the worker as a social person. The interests questionnaire drawn up by Edward Strong at the end of the 1920s may be regarded as the prototype for this form of approach. As you will know, those completing the questionnaire were asked to state their preferences in various fields of activity or for well-known people. The aim was to ascertain whether an individual had the same tastes as those with whom he would be working.

2.1.3 The competence model and counselling for occupational functions

Over the past 20 or 30 years one of the chief factors influencing industrial production has probably been the progress made in computer technology, which has also had a major impact on work organisation. Touraine notes that automation marked the introduction of a new form of work organisation that he terms ‘technical’. Here qualification corresponds to a recognised status in a social production system. This ‘technical working system’ calls for a number of specific skills on the part of employees differing from those required for trades under the occupationally focused system: they are linked to the interactions that from now on mark the working situation. Work becomes a function performed within a network. In such a context, as Even Laurent and Michel Huteau (1997) and Philippe Zarifian (1988, 2001) point out, certain skills are essential. Among them are the ability to work in a team (demanding sociability and an ability to communicate), initiative (calling for adaptability), responsibility (requiring the capacity to cope with the unexpected and develop new skills) and strict standards as regards the results to be achieved.

This model differs fundamentally from the two previous ones in three ways. First of all the worker is seen as possessing a fund of competences, which the Fordist operator is not. Secondly he or she is regarded as capable of evolving new skills, particularly as the work situation develops. Such terms as ‘qualifying organisation’ and
'lifelong learning' begin to be used. Then again, unlike the aptitude model, these skills tend to be closely linked to the circumstances in which they are displayed. It is not so much the person performing the tasks who is the central focus here as the interaction in a work context – actions, discussions, roles and so on.

Skills auditing techniques and validation and recognition of knowledge and skills are paradigmatic for counselling under the technical system of work organisation.

2.1.4 Globalisation and 'occupational chaos': counselling as an aid in making transitions

Recent economic changes such as the advent of new information processing and communications technology, coupled with the progressive globalisation of capital and industry, have resulted in a growing segmentation of the employment market. According to the theory of segmentation, there is not just one labour market but a number of compartmentalised markets (see, for example, Tanguy (ed.), 1986, p. 217-221). The primary segment is that possessing the most interesting and best paid jobs. The second market, which accounts for an increasing number of employees, is for jobs that are poorly paid and often involve deplorable working conditions. On this market workers need very little training. They need to be extremely flexible and they ‘belong to groups that are victims of discrimination: women, young people, and foreigners’ (Orivel et al., 1995, p.407).

For a growing number of workers the increase in job instability takes the form of repeated transitions which do not generally serve the purpose of career development. For example, a transition such as the switch from being unemployed to taking part in a course for job-seekers offers no prospect of finding a higher-grade job, requires no additional skills and offers no more responsibility. But as Nancy Schlossberg, Elinor B. Waters and Jane Goodman (1995, p.28) stress, a transition can also be seen as an event which brings the individual gains just as often as losses.

The notion of a ‘psychosocial transition’ was formalised by Colin Murray Parkes in 1971. It was defined as a major change in the course of a person’s life, with lasting effects, which takes place in a relatively short space of time and has a decisive influence on the person’s world-view (quoted by Dupuy, 1998, p. 49). For the purposes of lifelong guidance, a psychosocial transition has been defined as any event producing changes in relationships, daily occupations, beliefs and roles (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 27).

In such a context guidance counselling has less ambitious objectives than in the case of the competence model. It aims simply to assist clients to cope as well as possible with the various events that affect the course of their life. It involves analysing with them the situations in which they find themselves, the kind of support they might find helpful, their personal resources (such as their psychological traits) and the strategies they might adopt (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 49).

2.1.5 Eclectic practice

The various types of work organisation described emerged successively. Economic globalisation, with its worldwide division of labour and work ‘relocations’, is a recent phenomenon. This does not, however, mean that all the trades requiring specific aptitudes have disappeared. Similarly, Fordist-type jobs exist alongside functions falling under the competence model heading. At the same time, many people have to face up to repeated transition situations that can be long and painful. Vocational guidance counselling nowadays is thus confronted with a variety of widely differing problems. As a consequence it often appears eclectic, combining tools and methodologies evolved at different stages of its evolution.

2.2 Organisation of training and issues in school-based guidance

Work organisation is not the only contextual factor influencing vocational guidance. The way in which the school system is organised is another, very important one.

It is interesting to compare Germany and France in this connection. The school systems in these two countries are very different. In France there is just one type
of secondary school which also provides technical and vocational training. In Germany, on the other hand, there are three kinds of school, and responsibility for technical and vocational training lies largely with employers. The result is that vocational guidance counselling in France and Germany are radically different.

Under the French system, as Henri Eckert (1993, p.272) points out, ‘control over occupational mobility between the generations lies with the schools, to the detriment of the counselling services’. Counsellors are no longer decision-makers but accompanying mentors. The question arises: should a counsellor confine herself to providing information, or should she seek to educate her clients in decision-making strategy – or even become a psychologist concerned with personality development?

In Germany, according to Eckert, vocational guidance ‘is situated at the point of transition between general school education and the vocational training provided by firms. Its task is to coordinate supply and demand on the training market’. The counsellor, therefore, exercises a controlling function in terms of young people’s social mobility, not merely assisting their process of transition to an apprenticeship but also assessing the rationality of the choices they make.

2.3 Scientific models of guidance counselling: the psychology of guidance

While the problems arising in connection with guidance counselling are basically of a social nature and determined by the conditions and the background against which counselling takes place, they may also be influenced by considerations of social science, especially psychology. The founders of guidance counselling were convinced that growing scientific knowledge would provide the justification for guidance practice. Nowadays we have more reservations on this point, tending to feel that it is only the ends which justify a given practice. Moreover, the multiplicity of competing or complementary models is such that one can hardly talk in terms of a single guidance psychology but of several such psychologies.

2.3.1 Differential psychology and the match between individual and occupation

For Parsons (1909) the scientific method of guidance counselling is a simple one. It involves using what he terms ‘common sense’ in order to match the characteristics of an individual with those of a job. We have seen that this way of considering vocational guidance counselling accords with the occupationally focused system of work organisation. The basic postulate is that there are clearly defined occupations with similarly clearly definable requirements that can be matched with the stable features of an individual’s personality. The basic question for the scientists is how to determine the nature of the match or matches between an individual and a given occupation.

This question was studied in the framework of a differential psychology that considers the individual as having a stable personality definable in terms of intellectual functioning and general personality traits. In relation to guidance counselling, differential psychology has led to a closer study of aptitudes, values, interests and occupational types. It has been found that the first of these notions – aptitude – accords with the concept of an essential match between individuals and occupations, while models based on values, interests and types tend rather to regard the relationship as one perception.

René Dawis’ and Lloyd Lofquist’s theory of work adjustment (1984) is probably the prototype for a differential approach in vocational guidance counselling. John Holland’s questionnaires (1966, 1973) are the major example of the more specific field of youth counselling.

2.3.2 Developmental, cognitive and social questions of lifelong guidance counselling

Since the fifties research into guidance psychology has had other concerns, such as how plans for the future and the desire of young people to pursue a given career evolve, and with the development of personality and occupational careers over a lifetime. These questions have been modelled in a variety of ways. One may quote by way of example the model of John Krumboltz (1979), inspired by Albert Bandura (1977), the cognitive chart model
of Linda Gottfredson (1981) and that of Fred Vondracek, Richard Lerner and John Schulenberg (1986) inspired by the ecology of human development of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). Some approaches merely offer general frameworks, while others, such as that of Bernadette Dumora (1990, 2000), are based on broad-ranging empirical observation. Donald Super’s very general ‘life space, life span career development’ model is in a way a synthesis of previous analyses.

More recent research has been concerned particularly with describing the process of socialisation and studying personal and occupational transition situations. Here the emphasis is no longer on development but on transition. The pathways of adult life are seen as being far more dependent on context and events than was hitherto imagined. Thus Claude Dubar (1992, 1998) describes the ‘biographical transactions’ and ‘relational transactions’ that determine the make-up of a person’s identity. Certain studies, such as that of Nancy Schlossberg et al. (1995), deal particularly with the strategies individuals adopt in order to cope with predictable and unforeseen events over the course of their life.

2.3.3 Carl Rogers and counselling psychology
One can draw a demarcation line between studies aiming to determine the factors affecting the formulation of plans for the future and social and occupational integration (what Anthony Watts and John Killeen term ‘career theory’) and those concerned with the possibilities for effective intervention (‘guidance theory’). In the field of practice Carl Rogers (1951) is certainly one of the most influential authors, acknowledged as such in the United Kingdom and implicitly accepted in France. His central idea is that a non-directive interview conducted by a counsellor who adopts a stance of empathy and understanding permits the person being counselled to restructure his personality. A number of interactive counselling methods have since been developed more or less along these lines.

2.3.4 Link between psychological research and practical guidance counselling
While most theoretical guidance models result from addressing societal questions using one or other of the different psychological approaches (behaviourism, neo-behaviourism, cognitivism, dynamic psychology, psychoanalysis etc.), developments in psychology have in turn certainly played a role in the very conception of guidance counselling. Nonetheless the gap between psychological research and counselling practice has now widened. This is borne out by four phenomena. The first is a certain apathy with regard to theoretical counselling models on the part of many practitioners, in whose opinion theory bears little relation to what actually happens in counselling in practice, particularly during an interview (Fielding, 2000, p.80).

Secondly, one hears criticisms from theoreticians - often severe - of guidance counselling as it is practised. Claude Chabrol (2000, p.174) wonders whether the interview is not a soft technique that encourages counsellors to favour explanations in terms of an individual’s character (‘that’s how he is’) rather than in terms of situational, social or other factors. In vocational guidance counselling, notions such as “employability” sometimes give rise to such assessments of “disposition”.

A third indication of the current gap between theory and practice in vocational guidance counselling lies in the fact that certain problems encountered by counsellors in the course of their work are not seized upon by psychologists as the subject for major research projects although they would be suitable. Little attention is paid, for example, to the measuring and validation of skills, which is essential for counselling practice (‘In what circumstances is a competence transferable or can be made so?’). The theoreticians in the field of social sciences have distanced themselves from the questions raised by practitioners.

But the reverse is also true. Marked differences now exist between the conception of the human subject underlying the tools used by practitioners and those constituting the principal paradigm in social science. The tools used in practice, such as John Holland’s ‘types’, generally view the individual as possessed of a stable personality. Recently psychologists and sociologists have postulated a less stable model than hitherto.
A synthesis of the various contemporary approaches in social science has thus led to the outlining of a model of human subjectivity (Guichard, 2001a) resting on three basic propositions. The first is that this subjectivity can only be analysed taking into account the society in which the individual lives. The second stresses the comparatively malleable nature of this subjectivity, while the third considers a human being as a person under tension between certain personal identifications of himself and the universal (and trinitary) ‘I’ of the person (Jacques, 1979, 1982).

The assertion of the need to take society into account when analysing an individual’s subjectivity is based on the finding that a given society will at a given moment determine a certain ‘identity offering’ which the members of that society use as perceptions of themselves, each in his own way. This identity offering is structured in their minds in the form of mental outlines which one can consider, to use the term proposed by Martin Minsky in 1975, as ‘cognitive frameworks’ in which individuals perceive themselves and others. Such identity frames constitute a substratum for perceiving the structure of relationships between social categories (groups or communities of any type) as organised in the mind of an individual situated objectively and subjectively in his social cosmos (Pierre F. F. and Loic Wacquant, 1992, p. 73). Each individual, therefore perceives other people or himself in identity forms constructed with reference to certain cognitive frameworks. The identity form (Dubar, 1998) may then be defined as a conscious perception of oneself or another in accordance with the structure of a specific identity framework.

The subjectivity of a human individual is nonetheless comparatively malleable. The findings of research into identity and groups lead us to distinguish, from among the various identity forms, those which are subjective. Just as certain stereotyped dimensions sometimes enable us to situate a person in a specific identity frame, so the ‘subjective identity form’ seems to be a true construction of self within an identity frame which involves phenomena of ‘identisation’ and ‘personalisation’ (Mairieu, 1979), of ‘primus inter pares’ (Codol, 1975), and of ‘subjectivisation’ (Foucault, 1982, 1994-IV) etc. This construction of self is in large measure dependent on the contexts in which an individual interacts, suggesting a vicariousness of subjective identity forms. This would mean that an individual constitutes himself in different identity forms according to the contexts in which he interacts – hence the posited comparative malleability of subjectivity. The stability or malleability of self depends in fact on the degree of complexity of the society in which an individual lives, since the identity offering (and particularly its volume) will vary with the society concerned. The malleability of subjectivity, moreover, will also depend on the extent of integration of the different fields of social relationships in that society. Depending on the society, the different identity frames will be more or less connected or disconnected, so that the degree of malleability will depend on the interactions of the individual offering him the possibility of making more or fewer experiments in self-construction in accordance with the structure of different identity frames.

The fact that subjective identity forms are vicarious does not mean that the sense of constructing an individual identity is lost. Each identity is in fact a different way of being oneself. Taken together they form a unified system constituting the subjectivity of the individual. Even more fundamental, however, is the fact that the latter appears ‘in tension’ between each of his particular identities and the universal ‘I’ of the person (Jacques, 1979, 1982), leading him to see himself necessarily and simultaneously as both ‘I’, ‘you’ (in the language of the other person to whom he is speaking), and ‘he/she’ (the person ‘you’ speak to in ‘my’ absence), in other words as outside each of his own particular identities. Confronted with a changing environment, the subject is constantly crystallising in identity forms without ever being able to resolve to halt at any one of them because as ‘1-you-s/he’ he or she can never perfectly coincide with any of the separate selves (2), being apparently driven by a primordial impetus that leads one both to seek to identify oneself in one or other form but always to remain outside of them.

This concept of the subject renders the issues of vocational guidance counselling
more complex. The idea of a client whose principal personality characteristics are definable is gradually giving way to that of a ‘multivocal’ subject (to use Bakhtine’s terminology, cf Wertsch, 1990 and Häyrynen, 1995) whose identity is never finally structured. Should the counsellor’s objective therefore be to assist her client in becoming stabilised in certain identities – as is postulated, for example, by the model of John Holland? Or should she on the contrary seek to help the client diversify a subjective system of identities, as the political philosophy of Michel Foucault (1988, 1994-IV) would suggest?

3 Aims and objectives of guidance counselling in practice

The steadily widening gap, over the last century, between the practice of guidance counselling and psychological research may be due to the failure of science to provide answers to practitioners’ chief problems. Academic studies tend to be concerned with throwing light on the process itself, on how things happen. They do not ask the question ‘what should be done?’. They ask ‘how?’ but not ‘to what end?’ Theoretical research seeks to know and to describe phenomena as they are. It is not evaluative or practice-oriented: it does not tell us what action or actions should be taken to achieve a given end.

This should not lead us to conclude that the scientific approach holds no interest for practitioners. In fact, it does so in two ways. In the first place, it can contribute to their greater effectiveness by, for instance, helping them to understand the processes involved in their activity. Secondly, it can uncover hitherto unsuspected ethical problems, by asking, for instance, whether the benevolent neutrality that constitutes the fundamental principle of non-directive guidance counselling is not, perhaps, a very subtle form of manipulation.

Nonetheless, only by establishing the ethical, economic and social objectives is it possible to define the practical objectives of vocational guidance counselling. For Binet (1908) these were obvious. In his view, the mission of vocational guidance counselling was to achieve a harmonious society based on the recognition by each member that he was in the situation appropriate to his abilities. The counsellor’s objective was therefore a simple one: to define accurately the aptitudes required for a specific occupation and those possessed by each individual. The aims and practical objectives of counselling were intrinsically linked.

The current situation is different. First of all the objectives of counselling in practice are more diverse than they were at the beginning of the century. Then it would seem that the purpose of vocational guidance counselling is rarely questioned, particularly in ethical and social terms. Then again, the question of the link between aims and objectives would seem to be somewhat complex.

3.1 Objectives, demands and practice

The objectives of vocational guidance today are manifold. Because of their institutional position counsellors find themselves formulating these objectives in response to the more or less explicit expectations of their clients – which again may vary considerably. Sometimes, for example, it may be a case of helping a client to consider what he wishes to become and the subjective identities he wishes to construct for himself. Here the objective is to help him to take a more detached view of the identity forms that are his. At other times the problem is one of taking a decision. Its nature may vary, calling for different techniques. In cognitive terms it may mean assisting the client to a better perception of the problem; whereas in terms of personal development helping someone to decide may mean allowing him to crystallise in certain identity forms.

3.1.1 What is asked of the counsellor

If we juxtapose the observations of Josette Zarka (2000) regarding the interactions of counselling with those of Bernadette Dumora (1990) concerning the thinking underlying young people’s choices, we may distinguish four main categories of questions which the young people – or their families – may put to the counsellor. The strategic questions are those of ‘school consumers’ (Ballion, 1982) focusing on excellence. They may take the form...
of ‘What is the best strategy for reaching
the highest social position I can hope to
reach?’ Some young people of modest
origin whom Ber nadette Dumoura re-
ters to as ‘pragmatists’ transpose the question
into a minor key and ask ‘What can I do
to achieve the modest aim that I have set
myself? What she terms ‘ambiguous ques-
tions’ reflect the fact that young people
are in a situation of expectancy or adopt-
ing an attitude of resignation. These ques-
tions mix questions of scholastic strategy
with the pupils’ principal concern, namely
whether they should or not give up hope
of attaining certain academic, occupa-
tional or even personal identity forms in
which they had put their hopes. For these
young people the interaction of counsel-
living is of primary importance. Then again,
certain demands are paradoxical. They
may be expressed as ‘Influence me to
make me capable of deciding’ or ‘Influ-
ence me in this direction to make sure of
the decision I take’. Such demands ema-
nate from young people who are either
engaged in a process of rationalisation
that is leading them to abandon their pre-
vious hopes, or are holding fast to illu-
sory hopes – though these are at odds
with their present situation.

The question asked of guidance coun-
selling sometimes takes a very general
form: ‘How can I cope with this transi-
tion?’ Certain questions presuppose that
the person asking is conducting a gen-
eral audit of his or her principal experi-
ences of life and defining plans for his
future. One speaks, for instance, of a
skills audit which can also mark the be-
ginning of a process aimed at the vali-
dation of knowledge and skills acquired
by experience, i.e. a procedure terminat-
ing in the award of a certificate recog-
nising all the knowledge acquired in the
course of various occupational or non-
occupational activities.

3.1.2 An example of how to handle a
guidance counselling relationship
In order to meet these various demands
counsellors employ a number of differ-
ent relationship techniques and a variety
of tools such as tests or questionnaires.
We could mention, for example, the ap-
proach proposed by Norman Gysbers,
Mary Heppner and Joseph Johnston (1988,
2000) which is made up of four principal
stages.

The interview begins by establishing a
‘working alliance’ between the counselle-
or and his client. The process has three
aspects: an agreement as to the goals to
be attained, an agreement as to the most
suitable means for doing so and the con-
struction of a link between the counsellor
and the client. As Gysbers et al. point
out (1998, p. 125), some kind of link
between counsellor and client, a relation-
ship of caring and confidence, would
seem to be necessary; without such a re-
lationship, the efforts to attain the objec-
tives are jeopardised.

The second stage involves gathering in-
formation about the client in different
fields using a variety of methods. Among
the fields to be explored are the client’s
interests, his values, his apti-
tudes and abilities, his view of himself,
others and contexts; the fundamental di-
ensions which seem to structure his
conduct; his identity in terms of ethnic
origin and gender, the means used to
render these roles, frameworks and past,
present and future events in his life sig-
nificant, the potential obstacles and coer-
cive factors, whether personal or contex-
tual, the type of decision to be taken etc.
The many techniques that may be used
in order to gather this information include:
assessing the course of the client’s per-
sonal life and career (Life Career Assess-
ment) based on the theory of Alfred Adler
(1931); Adler distinguishes between thr ee
spheres of an individual’s rela-
tionship with the world that are interlinked –
the sphere of work, of social relations and of
sex (meaning friendship and love). Other
techniques are the career genogram de-
veloped in an extension of the work of
Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson
(1985, 1990), occupational categories,
personality or ability tests, standard in-
terest or work value inventories, question-
naires such as the Career Transition
Inventory of Mary Heppner (1991) aimed
at measuring variables linked with inter-
nal processes that may prove helps or
hindrances in a transition situation.

The third stage involves understanding the
information about the client and formu-
lating hypotheses as to his objectives and
problems. The counsellor bases himself
on theoretical models and personality
theories with which he is familiar. He
takes into account intercultural ap-
proaches and work on gender identity. This enables him to identify and analyse the themes that run through a client’s career and personal life. Gysbers et al. (1988, p.238) define these themes as words people use to express their ideas, values, attitudes and beliefs about themselves (statements of the ‘I am...’ type), and other people (‘X is...’) or the world in general (‘Life is...’). This definition of life themes constitutes a kind of content analysis dialogue in which the counselor proposes themes to the client during and after the information-gathering process.

The last stage is designed to help the client construct career objectives and formulate a plan of action and to conclude the counselling relationship. Defining an objective sometimes requires that the consultant search for information. The fundamental requirements for an objective are that it should be precise and observable, include a time-frame for its realisation, be feasible and, possibly also, take written form. Objectives should be susceptible of being included in a specific plan of action leading to their realisation. The counselling relationship concludes by taking stock of the whole process and winding up the relationship.

3.1.3 Guidance education

The one-to-one counselling relationship is not, however, the only form of counselling in practice. From the seventies onwards most of the wealthier countries saw the gradual development of career education (Guichard, 2001b; Guichard, Guillou et Lowit, 2001) aimed at helping clients, chiefly young people, gain a better view of the problem and make choices for guidance.

From the practical teaching point of view one can distinguish two main types of process here, namely what Hoyt (1977) referred to as ‘infusion’ and those incorporated in specific programmes. ‘Infusion’ means using ordinary teaching to give guidance education. One talks, for example, of infusion when a teacher of languages uses his lesson to work with his pupils on documentary material concerning with the work done by young people in another country where the language being taught is spoken and when he or she leads them to compare this material with material produced in their own country.

Guidance education programmes can be enshrined in school timetables alongside other subjects. Many such programmes for use in school are based on the traditional model of matching and lead participants to construct portraits of themselves in terms of their interests, values, qualities, school performance etc. The structure of these portraits is obviously dependent on the taxonomies on which a particular method is based. The pupils perform a similar process with occupations and training and thus end up with a list of their characteristics and those of various occupations and training. The programme leads them on to determine how these characteristics can be combined and hence to effect a match. One of the most frequently used taxonomies is that of John Holland.

3.2 Aims

If the objectives of practical counselling are generally clear, the same cannot be said of the aims. It would seem as if, since Parsons, a sort of consensus has reigned to the effect that the focus is on the individual and his or her capacity to face transitions. Starting out from the client’s request, the counsellor’s task is to help him make the most of his advantages while bearing in mind the limitations imposed by the prevailing conditions.

Implicitly the model dominating vocational counselling is to help the individual adjust to the world as it is. This view has sometimes been expressed by ideologues in radical terms. For example, one of the leaders of a French employers’ organisation said recently that the purpose of vocational guidance counselling was to lead everyone to accept the results of economic globalisation, and that young people needed to be prepared to live in a world of minimal collective bargaining. The purpose of guidance today would therefore be to “prepare young people to be flexible” and help them accept the structural changes revolutionising the labour market (de Calan, 1997, p.205).

Others, though remaining client-centred, see the aims of vocational guidance counselling from a less economist point of
view. This is the case, for example, of Claude Pair, who in a paper presented in reply to the above assertion stated that “school has to develop and anchor the personality so as to enable every young person to establish his own identity, pursue objectives and be creative. In fact, this is what is called education by choice”. (Pair, 1997, p.251).

It would seem, however, that one could conceive of other aims for vocational guidance counselling. In 1970 a UNESCO committee of experts proposed a definition of vocational guidance that opened the way for less individualistic considerations. This committee stated that guidance counselling consisted in enabling a person to become aware of, and develop, his or her personality traits in order to choose his or her course of study and work in every situation, while being concerned with serving society and extending the scope of his or her responsibilities (Danvers, 1992, p.190).

This definition puts the stress on an individual’s social and moral development (serving society and assuming more responsibility). From this standpoint one might perhaps suggest that with four-fifths of mankind living in growing poverty, vocational guidance counselling might be used to prepare young people to contribute to creating a world in which the gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ is narrower. One might also consider that at a time when questions of identity have become so crucial (as the multiplication of identity-motivated conflicts testifies), it should try to help the person realise the limits of the identity frame that makes up his or her little world.

3.3 The link between aims and objectives

The question of how the aims and objectives of guidance counselling tie in with one another also requires investigation, since a single objective may be associated with opposing aims. Thus activities designed to distance subjects from their current identity forms may very well have the aim both of encouraging flexibility in future workers and of leading young people to reconsider their identity stereotypes and realise the dangers they involve. Similarly, in an activity such as a local development project, in which adolescents from different environments work together as a team, participants acquire skills they can either use to further their careers in today’s economically competitive world or to involve themselves in developmental work in poorer countries.

3.4 Guidance aimed at personal development

One last remark is necessary. Most approaches to choice of occupation and life-long or transition planning have two features. Firstly, they do not concern the person as a whole but concentrate – admittedly to differing degrees – on only one aspect: training, guidance or finding a job. Secondly, they are based on a positive conception of human beings and may be regarded as laicised versions of the idea of man occupied in doing God’s work on earth. Consequently they disregard the often negative factors bound up with certain crystallisations of identity, which human beings have demonstrated throughout the 20th century. While they explain quite well how one becomes an engineer and even the reasons that might lead a person to become one, they say nothing about what that engineer will do. Will he or she help to develop a deprived region or design a device to be used for the destruction of whole sections of the population?

The question underlying counselling practice and research today is how to enable each client to realise his full potential. Moreover, as we have already seen, counselling practice centres around the concept that a person should, with the counsellor’s individualised help, discover the answer to this question for himself. This does not exclude the possibility that a given individual may consider that for himself self-realisation requires his involvement in a group of political activists who embrace an ideology of nihilism...

This explains why counselling practitioners and theoreticians nowadays seem to have no alternative but to reflect on the good and the common good. This might lead them to place concern for their own and others’ personal development at the centre of guidance counselling, and to follow the fundamental principle that self-fulfilment as envisaged by counselling
practice cannot be achieved without the development of others. The central question would thus no longer be ‘How can one help a person to fulfil himself as a separate individual?’ but ‘How can one help a person to realise her human potential by assisting others to fulfil their own potential in their own way?’ While both these approaches are directed to the individual, in the first case the aim is fulfilment of a person conceived as a separate individual, whereas in the second the aim is to develop each member of society.

This new focus for guidance counselling needs to be based on values for action that could be accepted as universal, values such as allowing each person to develop her entirely human characteristics in her own way. This search for universally acceptable principles as a foundation for guidance counselling, in practice would certainly cause counsellors to evolve certain individual expectations which, when roughly formulated, cannot be rendered universal. This is the case, for example, of the statement ‘I wish to achieve complete self-fulfilment’. Such a wish could in fact imply deciding to destroy everything regarded as an obstacle – including other people.

One need hardly stress that this search for universal principles will not result in proposing some kind of abstract model of humanity. The objective is not to deny particular identity forms. On the contrary, it is to encourage recognition of the humanity of others regardless of ethnic, cultural, religious, social and sexual differences. This, of course, involves designing guidance methods aimed at avoiding an individual enclosing himself in his identity and rejecting as not human any identity form that does not correspond to his own subjective identities (Guichard, 2001a; Guichard et al., 2001). This type of guidance would aim to provide a client with the opportunity to recreate himself as a person (Jacques, 1982), that is as a ternary product (I - you – s/he) of the relationship of dialogue with others. This is what creates him and leads him, each time it occurs, to distance himself from each of his self-crystallisations.

The proposal that we should ensure a universally acceptable moral basis for guidance counselling would inevitably have its consequences for counsellors in practice. Thus if it is found that some existing forms of work organisation do not lead to personal development but genuine suffering at work (Dejours, 1988; Hirigoyen, 2001), one would have to draw the appropriate lessons for guidance education programmes. One might, for instance, conceive of these programmes as based on a reflection of what human work involves; that their objective is to prepare young people so that they can claim this human element for themselves and for others.

Bibliography


