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# Lifelong learning, counseling and life designing to promote careers for the future

## **Unitwin International Network**

Life Designing Interventions (counseling, guidance, education) for decent work and sustainable development

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The authors argue that a rapidly changing and complex global work market poses unique career-related challenges that require lifelong learning, counseling and life designing to help individuals to access sustainable careers. Lifelong counseling and education are expected to foster personal empowerment and fulfillment while also tempering the impacts of careers on planetary stability, global peace and concerns of sustainability for the future. To promote sustainable careers action and the individual, social and political levels have to be combined.

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Lifelong learning, counseling and life designing interventions are becoming key practices. These interventions harbour one main purpose: to design an individual's work pathway or their life. They help individuals build a vocational self-concept appropriate to the current world of work. This activity requires individuals to engage in a certain type of reflection on themselves and their experiences. It is imperative that these interventions be studied and supported by international organizations and put into action by national public policies as they are needed to help individuals face a set of major social changes occurring all over the world. In this context, the issue of access to work is crucial to ensure decent lives and promote an individual's life-long self-construction (Guichard, 2005). The labour market continues to generate more and more social and economic 'grey zones', which are social spaces where traditional regulated work categories are disappearing (Bureau et al., 2019). At the same time, the rapid development of novel technologies and forms of communication have generated new opportunities for work and learning. However, these changes require people to be more adaptive, strategic and entrepreneurial to navigate this fluid labour market and the possible obsolescence of their knowledge and skills. Moreover, the working world and workers are also facing the global challenges of climate change and the biodiversity crisis, which require radically innovative production practices. Workers must now imagine their careers while anticipating the consequences of their actions on a planet with limited resources (Guichard, 2016). These challenges constitute major considerations for policy makers when developing public policies to promote access to sustainable careers for all.

## **Sustainable careers in a shifting labour market**

The 21st century labour market is unstable and characterized by frequent job transitions, making it a fundamental challenge to construct sustainable careers, find decent work and build a decent life (Blustein et al., 2019). The emerging research field of the Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development can help define both sustainable careers and life projects (Di Fabio and Rosen, 2018). Just as traditionally a product is considered sustainable if it requires a manageable amounts of materials and can be produced using renewable and non-polluting processes, the construction and management of a sustainable career and life project should also aspire to preserve, generate and regenerate resources (Di Fabio, 2019). Career and life are more sustainable if rooted in a paradigm of meaning, anchored to authenticity, self-attunement and purposeful identitarian awareness (Di Fabio, 2014). The construction of a sustainable career and life requires a preventive perspective in guidance and career intervention, balancing employability on one hand and objective talents and potential (what I am able to do), subjective talents and potential (what energizes me in doing it) on the other. Thus, sustainable careers and sustainable lives promote sustainable development and decent work through the respect for talents and for the meanings of each person within his or her culture and environment, in terms of harmonization of complexity in/with self, the natural environment and other environments (Di Fabio and Tsuda, 2018).

## Lifelong learning as a key component to lifelong employability

Ethnic, racial, gender and social class disparities in education and employment continue to constrict life course choices and outcomes for much of the world's population. At the same time, however, there are promising innovations to engage lifelong learners in gratifying, sustainable educational endeavors that open doors to new employment possibilities, especially for historically marginalized populations (American Psychological Association, 2012; Chan et al., 2019; ILO, 2018). Specifically, there is a call for discourse and activities in lifelong learning that prioritize social justice over market-driven goals as a primary force (Vargas, 2017).

These social justice-oriented efforts have four key qualities. First, successful lifelong learning opportunities must work within the contextual, cultural and community realities of the learner. By recognizing the place-based lived experience of the learner, educational opportunities are more likely to be relevant and engaging. The psychology of working theory clarifies the importance of socio-cultural context in the conceptualization and direction of one's working life and career (Duffy et al., 2016). Second, lifelong learning programmes should challenge deterministic policies by encouraging democratic reciprocity and enabling the learner to be a self-determining agent (Biesta, 2006). Third, the design of lifelong learning should be grounded in an awareness of human development across the lifespan (Erikson, 1975; Elder, 1998) and there should be an intentional effort to address life stage concerns that are most relevant. Fourth, inventing the future is both an interpersonal and intrapersonal process (Jarvis, 2006). New innovations in lifelong learning need to attend to both as they provide a relational space for self-understanding within a collective, through the articulation of one's own unique, creative and desire-driven narrative (Guichard, 2016).

## Lifelong counseling and life designing for careers of the future

Drastic changes have been occurring at an accelerated rate in both social and working contexts. Individuals must actively adapt to these changes as more workers are forced to make transitions in their working lives. To cope with changing conditions, personal and career development interventions are needed to accompany and guide individuals throughout life so that they can best promote their own career development. This means that vocational guidance solely to help young people manage their school-to-work transition is no longer sufficient. We must promote lifelong counseling policies.

Lifelong counseling and life design interventions are intended to support people in their lifelong career and personal constructions, helping them to generate actions that promote the attainment of sustainable careers and decent working conditions. Through this process, individuals become constructive *agents* of their own realities – in relation to the social contexts in which they develop, and the subjective experiences they generate within themselves. It is crucial to take cultural and social diversity into account and to lend particular importance to situations of social injustice that affect vulnerable groups. This can be achieved by focusing on individual empowerment, by promoting community intervention programmes and by strengthening institutional support and public policies that promote access to sustained careers and lives (Aisenson et al., 2018). In this context, the concept of sustainability has to consider three interconnected aspects: the development of a

dignified life with and for others; secured by fair and supportive institutions; and ensuring the sustainability of authentic human life on our planet (Guichard, 2016).

## Lifelong learning and counseling across cultures

Counseling practices and theories are social and cultural productions. For this reason, they cannot be transposed across cultures without being appropriately contextualized. This contextualization will favour a counselee's understanding of the goals and purposes of a counseling or educational intervention and as such, their adherence. Contextualization is therefore a key factor if we want to promote lifelong learning and counseling for all, considering the great social and cultural diversity around the world. We provide recommendations here for aspects that should be considered when contextualizing counseling practices and theories.

First, at the epistemological level, it is important that concepts are re-developed using an interdisciplinary approach that considers the dialogical interaction between concepts and the context. We may say that concepts have "to be forged with others, not for others" (Freire, 1975, p. 32). It is essential to be sensitive to cultural differences and specificities. In some cases, when co-constructing unifying concepts, it may be especially useful to integrate some aspect of mainstream theories with culture-specific aspects to create new adapted theoretical frameworks. Such a combined emic-etic approach enables theory development to be locally relevant (Arulmani et al., 2011). Second, within each cultural setting, diversity as it relates to the intersectionality of gender, social class, or race/ethnicity, etc., should be considered when developing theories and practices. Finally, lifelong strategies and counseling practices should always be deconstructed and reconstructed in a process of co-construction (Nota and Rossier, 2015) and through an intercultural dialogue (Santos, 2014). In that sense, group-based interventions and communitarian strategies should be fostered. In essence, the context must always be considered and intercultural dialogue is key in promoting sustainable careers for all by means of lifelong learning, counseling and life design across cultures.

## Lifelong learning and counseling for all

Equitable access of learning for all is an assumption underlying the concept of lifelong learning. The idea is to provide opportunities to engage fully and gain from inclusive and equitable lifelong learning for people of all ages, genders and across different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Yet, equity in access to lifelong learning continues to be more an ideal than a reality. While the shift from national economies to a digital global economy and the proliferation of networked technologies have expanded platforms for lifelong learning, they have also created technological divides and further complicated the issue of access and participation in lifelong learning. The danger is for lifelong learning to become restricted to the privileged few who have access to the infrastructure and are equipped with the knowledge and skills to participate in it. Thus, opportunities may not be available to marginalized and disenfranchised groups, such as the elderly, women and girls; people living in poverty or in extreme conflict contexts; those with disabilities or reduced mobility; as well as refugees, migrants and ethnic and racial minorities. To realize equitable

access to lifelong learning for all demands effort on a local and global level. Collective efforts need to leverage resources and engage in alternative methods grounded in the arts and indigenous approaches to support and promote lifelong learning for those who are typically excluded from the discourse.

### **Lifelong learning and counseling to promote well-being**

The psychology of working links the socio-cultural context, personal resources, decent work, needs fulfillment and well-being in a unified model (Blustein, 2006). However, well-being is often neglected by educational or career counselors who tend to be more focused on the question of the fit between individuals, their professional context and the feasibility of their choices and projects. Considering the 'meaning of work' (Morin, 2008) or the 'ethos of work' (Mercurio and Vultur, 2010) as an important need to be fulfilled helps us to consider well-being in our counseling interventions. This focus on meaning can be combined with a lifespan perspective, considering counselees' 'self-calendar' (Neugarten, 1996) or 'subjective age' (Heslon, 2016). Such an integrative model would consider the temporalities of age and existence along with the fluctuations of the relation to work among the main vectors of well-being throughout life. If well-being is something between hedonism (i.e. perfect happiness filled with positive affects without any negative affect) and eudemonism (i.e. the search for fulfillment and a full life), then the goal of any counseling process is to allow people to integrate their stories and their temporalities in a structured self-concept, as already suggested by Montaigne (1586). In other words, holistic life design practices can contribute to well-being if they consider both in a manner synchronized with ages of life, relation to work as well as all other life spheres.

### **Individual fulfillment in careers for the future**

Sustainable careers imply an adequate fit between the person and the context as well as access to dignified work over time to promote happiness, productivity and health (De Vos et al., 2018). Access to dignified work and a sustainable career is, of course, closely linked with social inclusion and recognition (Urbanaviciute et al., 2019). In a rapidly evolving labour market, lifelong learning should sustain workers' employability over time. However, lifelong learning is not enough as the evolution of the structure of the labour market may also lead to careers that are made up of sequences of experiences in different economic sectors. These transitions can happen throughout one's career and may represent moments of vulnerability. For this reason, public policies should also promote lifelong counseling to help people manage these transitions. Such interventions can promote the conservation of resources, proactive growth and development, and self-awareness. However, such interventions cannot simply be standardized if we want to ensure that they are available to all. The process of adapting interventions throughout the world must include considering the cultural context and local diversity. In addition, we must consider the person and the diverse contexts in which he or she evolves. Thus, a life design approach considering all socially defined life spheres is necessary to understand a person's situated or contextualized identity development (Savickas et al., 2009). People's subjective representation of themselves and of their environment overtime underlies their situated identity development, allowing them to navigate across spaces over time (Rossier et al., 2015). To understand an individual's career

trajectories, the context, life spheres and different layers of identity(ies) must be considered simultaneously. People's identity allows them to be the agent of their lives and to make sense of their trajectories in a dynamic social, economic and political context. To foster sustainable careers for all, public policies all over the world should promote access to education, lifelong learning, lifelong counseling and life designing, considering in particular diverse, underserved and vulnerable populations.

### Note from authors

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