

## **Working with diversity – Excerpts**

### **Introduction**

What is meant by ‘working with diversity’? In the context of careers work, it is taken to mean recognising diversity as an all-encompassing term that acknowledges and respects ‘difference’; such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic background, disability, religion/faith, age and other variables. In a multicultural society, ethical career practitioners will acknowledge diversity in their work and avoid practice which may lead to oppression. Multicultural awareness should permeate all the work that career counsellors and coaches undertake, but this can often be reduced to knowledge of policies of ‘equal opportunity’ or concerns over ‘political correctness’. The latter refers to language, ideas, or policies that address perceived or actual discrimination, but, when used negatively, implies that these considerations are excessive or applied because they are required rather than desired.

When working with diversity, a multicultural approach requires a practitioner to be aware of any barrier (to clarify, not ‘race’ alone) that can have an impact on an individual or group’s access to services and opportunities. Beyond equal opportunities, this involves a way of ‘being’ that welcomes diversity and strives for social justice, and is anti-oppressive (Thompson, 2011). This chapter will discuss the concepts, draw on the multicultural approach in counselling (Ivey, Ivey, and Simeg-Morgan, 1997; Sue, Allen and Pederson, 1996) and make suggestions to enable those involved in careers work to develop an appropriate awareness; and to practice multiculturally across different cultural groups, i.e. transculturally. But first we need to be clear about the terms used.

### **The language of diversity**

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It may be boring to repeat the point already made in this book, but language – the words we use - is important and of particular relevance within the context of multicultural work. Where to place this chapter in the book has been a problem, as it is at the core of career guidance and counselling work from its foundations in the work of Frank Parsons, his contemporaries and successors. My expectation is that anyone involved in this work is interested in the well-being of others and would in all probability see themselves as non-judgemental and open to the benefits of diversity. However, the issue is multilayered and complex, requiring examination. In recent years there has been concern that being ‘politically correct’ can on the one hand, be reduced to paying ‘lip service’ to equality, and on the other, stifle critical debate of contentious issues.

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This is not straightforward. Views differ about the terms ‘equality of opportunity’ and ‘equal opportunity’, and the meaning is contested in various disciplinary fields; including philosophy and the political and social sciences. For the context of this book we could focus solely on employment issues, but it is the premise of this work that career is more than just a job and that life and career are closely connected. Aside from employment, the concepts relate to access to a range of services, as noted above; such as financial services, education, housing, the justice system and the right to vote in a democratic state. One way of thinking about the difference is that ‘equality of opportunity’ connects in abstract ways to the theories which underpin the concept. ‘Equal opportunity’ is, generally, more grounded in the context of employment practices as a legal right to prevent discrimination.

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### **Equality of opportunity**

‘Fair equality of opportunity’ is associated with the work of philosopher John Rawls (1971), who suggested that equality of opportunity occurs when individuals with the same innate

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talent and ambition have identical prospects of success in any opportunity for which they compete. However, in terms of access to that competition in the first place, most (all?) societies in which equality of opportunity is sought, are unequal, as there will be significant disparity in terms of wealth, power and influence. Rawls prefers the word 'equity' which he views as superior to 'equality', as treating everyone the same, regardless of the advantages they inherit, reinforces and reproduces social inequality. In other words, if we make reference to the metaphor of providing a 'level playing field' for equality of opportunity, it is evident that individuals and groups in a given society do not compete as equals. Some are advantaged, by birth, income and the like and start 'the race' half way up the course, and others are disadvantaged and 'handicapped' by the same criteria; starting the race behind the blocks and in some cases at the rear of the crowd. And, the notion of the playing field also assumes everyone wants to join the game and has the same goals.

No amount of meritocracy (in broad terms, the notion that we can all make it if we try hard enough) will counter this disadvantage for the majority of 'competitors'. Thus the moral and just idea of equal opportunity for all is problematic, as some people are simply more able to benefit from the opportunities available. That does not mean that it is all too difficult and as practitioners we cannot make a difference, we can, and suggestions at the level of practice will be made later in the chapter. As Sultana notes (2014, page 7), 'Working within the system, however, does not preclude working against aspects of it.' And working collaboratively with our clients to enable them to progress despite the system, where required, can make the job personally and professionally fulfilling.

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**Social justice in the context of careers work**

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If we accept that life chances (our opportunities to be what, as individuals, we consider to be successful) are not distributed equally, then a belief in social justice implies that we should ensure that all have equal chances to succeed in life. There is a sense of mutual obligation here to support others and, by extension, a need for a redistribution of opportunities, although how such redistribution could or should occur is contested (Gale, 2000). Again, the philosophical work of John Rawls (1971) is influential in this debate. Acknowledging the responsibilities of all, Rawls argues for a balance between social equity and individual freedom, but there is a tension here that is not easy to resolve.

### **Reflection point**

Most (all?) people working in the helping services would claim a commitment to social justice and inclusion, but can you see the paradox here in terms of upholding the values of diversity alongside social inclusion?

On the one hand, inclusion is a liberal desire for all to be included within a society, but on the other, valuing diversity suggests that plurality in social life (different ways of living and participating in society) is acceptable, even where this deviates significantly from the norm. To suggest that full inclusion can be achieved through policies and political activity is a liberal utopia and some would argue that difference – plurality – cannot and should not be overcome by politics (see Biesta (2006) for an extended argument). Whilst the likes of liberal theorists such as Rawls would not be suggesting that people of difference should be assimilated into the ‘mainstream’ culture; in order for them to be included, their difference has to be de-politicised when included in the mainstream: in other words, that which makes people different gets pushed out of the political sphere and into the private domain (Mouffe, 1993). And as part of this discussion, we could also question the terms diversity and

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difference here. 'Diversity' can be viewed as 'variations on a theme', making the differences we see in 'others' reducible to mere cultural aspects. In effect this can lead to an unquestioning acceptance of the norms, values and particular interests of the majority group. 'Difference' recognises that difference **cannot** be included into a society, via some kind of 'tossed salad' approach. Those 'doing' the including, do so from a particular (powerful) position and cannot know and understand what it is like to be 'the other' (Biesta, 2006). However, this argument should not be taken to mean we should not engage with difference because we can never fully 'know' what it is like to be someone else. Instead our responsibility as practitioners is to take an ethical stance and recognise that our understanding and knowledge will always be limited, and identify how this is shaped by the historical, social, economic and political frameworks that structure the communities within which we live.

These academic concerns are all very well, and, I would argue, an awareness of such political issues is vital, but what happens on the 'ground' of practice? In the context of careers work, an important edited collection of papers published in 2005 by Irving and Malik, challenged career practitioners to acknowledge the wider political contexts within which they operate. Career education, guidance and counselling, and career coaching, are not neutral activities; they can be viewed as part of a narrowly defined agenda that serves the needs of the labour market and government employability goals. The work can, in effect, reinforce inequality (Irving, 2005). For instance, this might include guiding individuals into 'suitable' academic and non-academic pathways early within secondary schooling; fitting them into the 'realistic' choices for training and jobs at age 16; working within a discourse of pragmatism that does not challenge the status quo with regard to options for higher education; and, moving the unemployed into unsustainable short term and available 'opportunities' to meet the demands

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of a target culture and provide evidence of progression. All of this is political and we need to questions whose needs are being served. As Irving states:

The uncritical acceptance of such goals acts to move discussion away from a wider exploration of the concept of work in advanced capitalist countries, consideration of inequality and justice, and ways in which human value and worth are socially derived.

(Irving, 2005, page 4).

As argued in an earlier chapter, much career theory has focused on the individual and the choices they make. A call to think more profoundly about the causes of social exclusion (see Levitas, 2005), how to advance social inclusion and to promote social justice, requires the career practitioner to think more deeply about how we operate in a social and political context for careers. As stated before, we must work across disciplines and have a political awareness alongside an understanding of *psychosocial* approaches. If our interventions derive from narrow worldviews and the use of singular approaches within confined disciplines, we deny the social (Sultana, 2014). So, in the development of careers work, we need to engage with the individual and social/political context. To repeat C Wright Mills' words, public troubles (the political) cannot be separated from private experiences (the personal): 'Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and to the problems of individual life' (1970, page 247-8).

Thus, in our education and training for career counselling and coaching, we need to adopt a more complex view of social justice and multiculturalism in order to be able to work effectively with diversity. Since the Irving and Malik book was published, there have been on-going changes in the state provision of career guidance in the UK to 'include' and support

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both young people and adults with their career choices; none of which could be described as an unqualified success (Watts, 2013).

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Within the constraints of practice, the efficacy of careers work in terms of its impact on the status quo can be overstated – grand claims cannot be made. There are resonances here however with the previous debate in an earlier chapter with regard to ‘green careers’. Despite the social and economic restraints that affect the services we can offer or operate in, we do aim to make a difference at the micro level of practice, and we can all enhance this further if we have a thirst for social justice in our work. Drawing on the work of Gramsci (1971), Bauman (2006) and Sen (2008), Sultana emphasises that this is not an all or nothing approach and suggests that ‘social justice is a ‘stance’ rather than a state’ (2014, page 10). He also warns against a retreat into blaming the economic context for an inability to act in support of social justice. How we might develop a social justice ‘stance’ is outlined in a later part of this chapter. Whole books could be written on social justice, but I would like to end this section with a quote from Sultana. It reinforces the points made here, and arguments made in earlier chapters with regard to the dangers of individualistic and neoliberal approaches.

Career guidance approaches that eschew the social may very well end up reinforcing these broader trends, which is why the bigger picture cannot be forgotten, even as we struggle to live up to the demand of social justice in the face-to-face encounter with the ‘other’.

(Sultana, 2014, page 15)

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**In practice**

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In this section of the chapter I want to move on and consider how career counsellors and career coaches can work towards anti-oppressive practice. Before the text mentioned above, an earlier publication by Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani (2004) outlined the problems with the unthinking adoption of psychological and individualistic approaches to career development within collectivist cultures, citing their work in India and the region. The work of Mark Watson in South Africa has been mentioned in a previous chapter and in a recent article (2013) he supports their claim that individual decision making may not only be inappropriate in collectivist societies, it may also be subject to disapproval. Watson goes on to say, ‘In terms of identity formation in certain African cultures the language of *I* is the language of *we*. What happens to the group happens to the individual and vice versa’ (2013, page 7).

Reading this reminded me of an encounter some years ago at a conference where a researcher from an African country was making a similar point. As I recall, she was discussing the traditions of a collective community and using the narratives of women who had formed a trading co-operative to sell traditional crafts beyond their immediate and ‘normal’ market. A member of the audience commented that none of the women used the first person singular (*I*) when talking about their involvement in the project. “Well no” she responded, “in such places there is no such being as *I*, in African villages you cannot survive as an individual: the country, the climate will not let you.” And of course this influence does not end once economies industrialise - develop - and become part of a globalised economy. Westernised conceptions of the role of work and the meaning of ‘career’ do not overtake a philosophically different attitude to work that is based in a spirituality and set of values that have a longer history than many Christian-based beliefs (Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani, 2004; Watson, 2013).

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Within the helping professions, anti-oppressive practice is an explicit recognition that oppression exists in even the most democratic of societies. Anti-oppressive behaviour attempts to remove or negate the influence of that oppression. As a starting point within career counselling and coaching, we have already acknowledged that what works for one person does not necessarily work for another. But more is at stake, we have also discussed issues of power and control and the constraints imposed, sometimes for 'good' reasons by state governance. Practitioners can be conflicted by the need to control, i.e. move people off an unemployment register, and the responsibility to care for the individual's or group's particular needs and interests.

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### **The multicultural approach in counselling and psychotherapy: usefulness for career counselling and coaching**

As explained earlier, this chapter cannot make suggestions for working with specific groups; and we must always be aware of the problem of stereotyping when we think of fitting particular people into a preordained model, as this is also a kind of tyranny. Many of the theoretical approaches that are used in both career counselling and career coaching, assume a high level of resourcefulness in clients, whereas individuals' capacity to effect change will be influenced by their social context. The multicultural approach within counselling and psychotherapy has produced work that encompasses the social, alongside the psychological. The work of Sue et al (1996); Ivey et al (1997); Monk et al (2008) in counselling and psychotherapy, and Bimrose (1996) in guidance, supports both an integrated and multicultural approach that advocates the use of particular strategies as relevant to the client's needs. Jenny Bimrose (1996), who pioneered this work in the UK, pointed to the discussion offered by D'Andrea and Daniels (1991) of the four main approaches in training programmes

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for multicultural counselling in the United States. [See handout: **Culturally entrenched; Cross-cultural awakening; Cultural integrity; Infusion**]

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['Living in practice' multicultural competencies] ... implies taking time to understand the client's philosophy of life, beliefs, values and assumptions and not rushing to apply what we might think would be the best approach. It may suggest that a career counsellor or coach from the same background as the client may be more effective, although resource constraints will often limit this as a possibility. And authentic listening takes time, but the effective use of time is a key element and its importance in work that aims to be multicultural and transcultural cannot be over-emphasised. In a later chapter a range of counselling skills are considered and empathy, amongst other advanced skills and attitudes, is of particular relevance here.

Empathy, an attempt to understand and share another's feelings and emotions, is easier to display when culture is shared, but difficult to achieve in cross-cultural communications. And a reminder here, cross-cultural is not simply about ethnicity, it also refers to communication between different interest groups, as well as between adults and young people in any culture. Empathy is a way of 'being' with a client and not a skill that a practitioner switches on and off at the right time, but it is never fully achievable. As Arendt (1997) tells us, the one thing we all have in common is that we are all different in our uniqueness. So as practitioners we need to be alert to cross-cultural misunderstanding which can undermine the rapport building that is essential for empathic responses and anti-oppressive practice. Although an interesting subject, it would be a Herculean task to learn all the social messages contained in body language across different cultures, but we can be aware of common problems (Ivey et al, 1997). These are outlined in the following general points and the case study:

1. **Misattribution:** we can assign the wrong or unintended meaning to non-verbal behaviour. This is of course two-way; we can also send the wrong signal.
2. **Misunderstanding the context:** 'rules' about behaviour in formal and informal settings can vary across cultures.
3. **Missing signals:** gestures and body language are often subtle and can be missed by a person from a different culture. (Similarly words may be the same but the meaning can alter with the use of pace, cadence and emphasis).

(Reid, 2005, page181)

#### <Cross-cultural misunderstandings

1. **Misattribution:** Jo was irritated that his client did not maintain eye contact with him and thought they were disinterested in the discussion, but for Sha, Jo's 'staring' at her was both uncomfortable and rude.
2. **Misunderstanding the context:** At the career coaching conferencing that was taking place in one of the Arabian Gulf States, British Brenda offered her hand to 'His Excellency' after he gave the opening address. She was offended when he appeared reluctant to shake her hand and then surprised at the 'weak' handshake she received.
3. **Missing signals (gestures):** Daniel used a hand gesture which to him meant OK, great, A1, but he did not see the look on his client's face. For Maria, the client, the gesture had an altogether different meaning which was offensive. **Missing signals (words):** Jem was concerned that his client Prem, appeared to be getting frustrated with him as Prem raised his voice at the end of each sentence. When he spoke to a colleague later who had more experience of working with the group, the colleague

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explained that the difference in tone and tempo is a cultural norm, not necessarily evidence of increasing annoyance or frustration.

So, an important task for the practitioner is to be alert to their own body language, cultural values and beliefs. This helps in assessing the meaning of nonverbal and verbal cross-cultural communication and avoids making unwarranted assumptions. In addition to the examples above, there can be variations in; how to sit, opposite, at an angle, side-by-side; the use of space and closeness; amounts of touching (and whether there is a ban on any touching); voice levels and the importance of time structuring, i.e. keeping to appointment times. If our practice involves working often with particular groups, then we would wish to be familiar with the expectations and norms for the group, but what else can we do to improve multicultural competence, cultural preparedness and avoidance of anti-oppressive behaviour?

### **Improving our 'stance'**

The book has highlighted the importance of an awareness of the political nature of careers work and called for an exploration of how power shapes discourses within the field. But, back on the ground of practice, what other practical activities can practitioners engage with?

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Depending on the level of professional training, most courses will involve a period of placement activity. If placed in a situation with people that are culturally (in its widest terms) different, this can be used to increase self-awareness of a practitioner's own cultural values. It would be useful to reflect on the differences in an active way by recording impressions and assumptions, in order to learn from the experience. This can be through any means, for example a journal, written or verbal and a discussion with colleagues. Such placement activity can be short term where resources and time are in short supply; thus a visit to an

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‘unfamiliar’ cultural group can be used to find out about the group’s views about the purpose and process of career counselling and coaching. This new or developed knowledge of the group can be shared **appropriately** with colleagues, through a presentation, or publication, or via relevant social media sites. Representatives of different groups can also be invited to speak to peers on a particular topic. All of these suggestions, and you may have other ideas and better ones, can be undertaken by those in training and by experienced practitioners wanting to refresh their understanding. The aim in all of this is to become a reflexive, anti-oppressive practitioner who thinks beyond the immediacy of practice, and can demonstrate a way of being that goes further than knowledge of relevant anti-discriminatory legislation and ethical codes; important though the latter are.

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In discussing multicultural principles and anti-oppressive practice we need, of course, to avoid labelling individuals, expecting certain behaviour due to perceived membership of particular groups. A person may belong to a number of social groups, and the categories that may be used for convenience are socially constructed. At the same time the most significant group aspect is likely to affect, positively or negatively, the career ‘choices’ of an individual. Across Europe, the new workforce arriving from Eastern Europe and elsewhere, has different cultural experiences from previous migrants (who, for good or ill, may have shared a colonial past with their ‘host’ country). Career practitioners working with diversity in Western economies, need to be open to new ‘differences’ and attitudes to work, and the meaning of career. For example, a doctoral student of mine recently talked about one of her interviewees who is a well qualified, political and economic migrant from Eastern Europe. She is delighted to work in an occupation in the UK that to me seemed menial, considering her qualifications and previously high professional status. I took a judgemental stance on this; but my student

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educated me. The job within the UK represented a freedom to choose and a livelihood that was denied to the person in their country of origin.

In conclusion, whatever we encounter, the theories and approaches we attempt to apply need to be appropriate and adapted to the individual and groups concerned – ‘one size does not fit all’, indeed we may be trying to use the wrong clothes entirely. Before working with diverse individuals, working effectively with difference means we have to acknowledge the ‘otherness’ of the other and of ourselves. This requires critical insight. Watson (2013) in looking at the influence of culture on career at the macro, meso and micro level, is critical of the importation of approaches into non-Western cultures. This includes approaches like career construction theory (discussed in a previous chapter) that are more nuanced towards difference, if, **in application**, such approaches underplay the social and the cultural; and consequently fail to engage with the ‘local’ meaning of career, work and employment. For effective and anti-oppressive practice in such contexts, Watson suggests that ‘career practitioners themselves need to critically deconstruct and reconstruct the career theories that may inform their practice’ (2013, page 11).

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### **Further reading**

**Arulmani, G., Bakshi, A.J., Leong, F.T.L. and Watts, A.G. (eds) (2014) *Handbook of career development: international perspectives*. New York: Springer.**

As above, this is the most comprehensive text available to offer international perspectives on the issues raised in this chapter, but it is also full of practical innovations that are relevant across the contemporary field of careers work. There are 41 chapters and it is available as an ebook.

Reid, H.L. (2016) *Introduction to Career Counselling & Coaching*. London: Sage, pp. 123-143.

**Biesta, G.J.J. (2006) *Beyond learning: democratic education for a human future*.**

**Colorado, USA: Paradigm Publishers.**

There are many texts that can offer philosophical insights into what it means to be human, and the development of the rational and democratic citizen. Biesta problematises many of the accepted ways of thinking, and the discussion is useful when trying to think more deeply about what we mean when we engage in discourses about equity, social justice and inclusion. His 'field' is education, but the debate is relevant for careers work. It is a short book and will provide a 'way in' to those who want to understand more.

**Irving, B.A. and Malik, B. (2005) *Critical reflections on career education and guidance: promoting social justice within a global economy*. Oxon: Routledge.**

This remains a very useful text for exploring the social influences on 'career choice and decision-making'. It questions the long-held views on how to think about and practice career education and guidance. Alongside the academic discussion, each chapter provides examples of how to apply the concepts to practice.