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Career Intervention from a Psychological Perspective: Definition of the Main Ingredients of an Ecological-developmental Methodology[*]

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If career guidance is far from real life let's bring life into it

The experience and ideas we aim to share throughout this paper express the form according to which we organize and reflect upon our intervention, research and training experiences in the field of career guidance. This will be the synthesis — one among many possible ones — that guides and regulates our action and hence the content of this communication is above all useful to ourselves. The knowledge on the different ways of equating and solving the problem of career guidance is, as it is always, nothing else than the expression of our self-knowledge. This assertion can be associated to a constructivist conception, although constructivist perspectives say much more than this, as we shall see later on.

This paper is the result of some twelve years of work on career guidance carried out at the Institute of Psychological Intervention, Education and Development, at the Faculty of Psychology and Education, (University of Porto) where our efforts have been concentrated on research, intervention and training of psychologists in this field. Our aim will be to present and discuss the systematization of a perspective on career psychological intervention focused on career guidance methodologies and practices, as well as on the change processes involved.

In Tampere, last year, in a symposium on career guidance of which the present one can be considered to a certain extent the second part, we have exposed the theoretical principles and conceptions of what can be called an ecological-   -developmental approach we have been working on; that is, the issue was then the way of formulating the problem. Today our goal is the issue of how to solve it.

Theoretical principles and assumptions

Nevertheless it might be useful to remind briefly some of these principles and conceptions, at least those who might have direct implications for the issue of career guidance intervention:

(a) to envisage career guidance as a *psychological intervention*, stressing the psychological dimension of career tasks and of the process of career development;

(b) to bring together the *logic* of career guidance intervention and the *logic* of "spontaneous" development, *i.e.,* under no systematic and intentional intervention. This means to explore the possibilities of psychological development and intervention as a resource for understanding the logic of the client's functioning, development, and transformation in order to

identify the processes and mechanisms of psychological change, and to design isomorphous strategies;

(c) to consider personal development, and specifically *career development*, as the general aim of career guidance interventions;

(d) to understand the role of *life contexts* in the process of career personal development and hence stress the necessity of complementary ecological interventions that enable them to improve the quality of the experiences they provide to individuals so that they might promote their personal and career development;

(e) to ascribe *primacy to the relationship* that is permanently being established between the subject and the world of work over its terms (or parts);

(f) to conceptualize such a *relationship as a commitment* rather than a knowledge or information one. That relationship is mainly dynamic and energetic, *i.e.*, it can be described as liking/disliking, feeling attracted/not attracted, preferring/rejecting, investing/not investing. To sum up, knowledge (at last in its most common sense) is no more than a by-product and an indicator of that relationship between the self and the world of work. Indeed the commitment comes first: it is in the context of interactions with the world that the individual builds self and world personal representations (both faces of the same coin), builds himself as a subject (of meanings, affections, actions, and knowledge) to the extent that he(she) builds the instruments (cognitive structures, self-organization) for interacting and knowing the world;

(g) to formulate the *exploration* (questioning and transformation) *of career commitment* as a more specific aim of career guidance intervention and as a way of translating the concept of transformation of the subject-world relationship into psychological terms. It should be stressed that the starting point is the present client's commitment, that is why exploration *for* the commitment is not an adequate expression unlike exploration *of* career commitment;

(h) to consider that *cognition, emotion and action are elements of the same continuum of psychological functioning* and that cleavages between them might be rational but artificial, *i.e.*, non-psychological, which means that knowledge and cognition should be understood in broader terms so as to integrate emotion and action. Indeed emotion is as primitive as a powerful mode of knowing as well as action is always an expression of concrete situational knowledge;

(i) to agree that the client's guidance *need* (namely of adolescents) is *neither to be*

identified as lack of information on the social structure of training and occupational opportunities nor its resolution as providing/transmission of career information. Therefore the mechanistic metaphor of information processing does not help to understand how the client functions. It is well known that instead of linear information processing the subject tends to distort and select it according to affective valence, *i.e.*, to his(her) present commitments. Besides research results are conclusive: the main effect of the strategy of mere providing career information is cognitive simplification. A second result, although needing more conclusive proof, is the inhibition of further career exploration attitudes and actions;

(j) to emphasize the importance of meaning in career psychological functioning, development and intervention. Not always has meaning been envisaged as a central dimension in career guidance: the meaning the subject constructs for his(her) experience, the meaning of work in his(her) existence, the meaning of choosing a certain life style. Not only should this semantic dimension be explored and worked in career guidance, but psychological structures (*e.g.*, cognitive structures, self-organization, identity, ego, attachment structures, sense of personal competence, social perspective taking, interpersonal negotiation strategies, vocational-cognitive constructs system...) should also perhaps be taken as instruments for the construction of personal meanings, not forgetting that the adaptive, operational quality of these constructions is not independent of the developmental status of those psychological structures.

Analysis of the current structure of career guidance interventions

These are, in short, some of the main assumptions that have inspired our proposal for solving the problem of career guidance, *i.e.*, how to design, implement and evaluate career psychological interventions. We will try to give an overview of how to turn it out in practice.

The task is perhaps too ambitious within the limits of a paper. Although we cannot present and justify this experience on the whole we will try to give some glimpses that might allow the understanding of its main characteristics. We will do this through the possible balance between macro and microscopic dimensions of the intervention *process* which will be our privileged object of analysis, conceptualized in dialectical terms through a helicoidal line where different process dimensions get increasingly more integrated along its different stages. The selected dimensions are: structuring principles and objectives, intervention strategies, and processes of psychological change.

The project stems from the analysis of the structure of current career guidance interventions, frequently based upon three content areas: the self -knowledge, the knowledge of

education, training and work opportunities, and the knowledge of career decision making methods. This structure can be questioned in many ways:

(a) the primacy of the client's rational functioning;

(b) the emphasis on contents instead of psychological change processes;

(c) the formulation of the guidance problem in strict terms of knowledge;

(d) the separation between the self and the world;

(e) the cleavage between knowledge and action;

(f) the neglect of affective, emotional, motivational, and semantic aspects of the client's functioning;

(g) the informative-didactic approach;

(h) the non-consideration of the logic of functioning and transformation of the client;

(i) the high level of activities structure;

(j) the frequent presentation of these interventions as standardized packages.

Our first *démarche*, aiming to explore and try to elaborate an alternative intervention proposal based on the principles already mentioned was to examine the logic of designing, implementing and evaluating group career guidance interventions.

Project *versus* programme

The notions of programme and project can be used do differenciate two perspectives of approaching that task. The term programme is frequently associated with a more rigid, structured and directive way of organizing career intervention. Frequently the latter is presented as a pre-prepared package of objectives and activities to be implemented within any kind of client. Sometimes, the prevalent logic of its elaboration is the distribution of the intervention activities by the work time units (sessions). At the implementation level this option can lead to an overestimation of activities and contents in relation to the means-ends articulation, generating some forms of inconsequent activism or "taskism" from the part of the career guidance professional, which has few decisions to make along the intervention unless those that are directly related to its implementation within temporal limits (for instance, to finish the programme after 10 or 15 weekly sessions). On the part of the clients, the connection between their career problems and intervention activities is sometimes neglected and more clearly the relation between this rate of evolution of the implementation of the programme and that of client's changing and learning. In shout, the solution for the career guidance problem pre-exists the counseling process.

The alternative notion of project is, on the other hand, useful to imagine and develop interventions in a more flexible way. In this case they tend to be focused on the dynamics of the intervention process, on its intentionality, *i.e.*, on the methods-objectives relations, on its fitness to the client's status, problem and progressing rate and on the logic of his(her) functioning and development. The intervention evolves in a dialectical way since the contribution that the client brings to the session is crucial, leading to successive negotiations and reformulations. From the point of view of the guidance professional the main skill is the management of the intervention process. He will not be concerned with which precise activity will be implemented in session n? x or y. The intervention process will develop according to the client's needs and progression. The intervention will take shape on a dialectical and progressive basis.

Intervention structuring principles or objectives

Our intervention experience is based on this second option where the solution of the client's problem or demand is to be constructed both by the client and the psychologist within and along the intervention process. This does not exempt the psychologist from intervention planning. On the contrary, the task tends to appear as more complex and demanding. Instead of following the temporal distribution of the activities as the main criterion, we tried to elaborate an intervention project based on the definition of some great structuring principles from which the intervention will progressively develop and take shape. These moments or principles will define the basic framework of intervention and are no more than clusters of objectives that share some functional aspects. The methods, activities and techniques will be defined according to these clusters and presented as a *menu* from which the psychologist can select those that fit the specific equation problem x client is characteristics x situation x context x client's evolution during the intervention, etc.. That means that the psychologist has important decisions to make along the intervention process for which he must have the necessary evaluation tools available. The "programme" development ultimate phase is accomplished in the very intervention context. In addition, it should be noticed that the structuring principles or intervention moments do not represent a temporal sequence of phases but a set of recurrent cross-sectional clusters of objectives.

There are, obviously, many different ways of defining these structuring principles and their number is the less relevant issue. Nevertheless those we have used will be briefly presented.

l. *Process objectives*. The first moment deals with issues that may be considered as the creation of conditions that are necessary for the intervention to take place. These pre-requisites include the establishment of the psychologist-client relationship, among one of the most important ones, besides the negotiation of the intervention contract, and the assessment of the client's developmental status and of his(her) problem/demand.

2. *Preparation for the exploration process.* The second principle concerns those psychological changes that might enable the client to get involved and take advantage of exploration experiences. For instance, the promotion of the complexity of vocational-cognitive structures, the transformation of conceptions and beliefs about the career problem or the removal of inhibitory effects coming from negative, and sometimes, intense emotions, such as anxiety or confusion, and, finally, the learning and development of specific action skills and competences.

3. *Confrontation with the structure or social opportunities.* This is the moment that is most dedicated to the organization and integration of exploration experiences. It includes direct and indirect exploration activities both of education and training, and occupational activities.

4. *Action orientation and evaluation.* The last moment deals with the preparation for the commitment transformation. The changing of the client's present commitments is a process that has taken place from the outset of the intervention and especially along these two last moments. What some authors use to call decision making, will be here envisaged as an ongoing process of choice through the exploration of the self-world relationship leading to new commitments. At this stage it will be important to prepare the client for the involvement/implementation of the immediate new commitment, helping him(her) to anticipate conditions, constraints, challenges, and possible obstacles and ways of dealing with them. Other tasks concern the understanding and coping with uncertainty that is implied in any career choice, making the client aware of the need to explore the new commitment once he(she) is directly involved in it — the ultimate test to know whether the choice is adequate or not is to implement it — and the relation between this one and further choices, that is, the work on future time perspective.

After the formulation of general objectives, here clustered in four structuring principles or moments, the description of the next steps of the presentation of the methodology we have been following — from which an intervention guide was produced — include: (a) the intervention strategies; (b) the process and nature of psychological change; (c) the relationship between the logic of human functioning and development and the rationality of the methodology used.

A proposal for categorizing intervention strategies

At this stage the problem can be formulated as the selection of strategies that fit the structuring principles just mentioned and that match the logic of the client functioning and change. The analysis and exploration of the various strategies used, not only in career guidance but also in the domains of psychological counseling and psychotherapy, led us to the definition of a set of categories:

(a) *programming*

These are strategies issued from classical and operant behaviorist approaches. They are interested in associations and dissociations between stimuli, stimuli and responses, and responses and consequences. The analogy of computer programming might be suitable since the psychologist merely manipulates variables supposed to have a direct effect on the client's behavior. In other words, the manipulation of contingencies can be seen as the alteration of the client's behavioral programme. For obvious reasons these strategies cannot be considered especially useful from the point of view of career guidance intervention: they ascribe the client a passive role and do not account for the complexity of human functioning.

(b) *information.*

Underlying these strategies is the assumption that learning and change can be achieved through the acquisition of information. This kind of strategies is widely used in career guidance interventions where not only information about education, training, and occupations is provided but also about the client. We should bear in mind that tests results represent also information that is provided to the client. They are usually based on functionalist cognitive information processing models besides common sense. Contrarily to its users expectations clients do not process information linearly and they do not examine its content in a rational way so as to make a decision. The effects are even less flattering: decrease of cognitive complexity and tendency to less initiatives of further career exploration.

(c) *instruction.*

More sophisticated than the latter, the instructive strategies aim to teach/instruct the client specific courses of thinking and behaving. It is in this category that we can find the various approaches commonly designated as skills training. In theoretical terms these strategies can be identified with the social learning model and with classic cognitivistic approaches, from self-control to cognitive restructuring. Besides rationalism, the common feature is the didactic and prescriptive approach which entails the tendency to impose the client a framework of meanings for his(her) career experiences. In any case these strategies do not stimulate the autonomous search and construction of personal frameworks and meanings for life experiences. A second common characteristic entailed by the structured and prescriptive orientation is the definition of criteria for "good" psychological functioning: rationality, social adjustment, cognitive clarity, functionality... In the career guidance domain this kind of strategies can be exemplified by the training of functional problem-solving information processing skills for career decision making. As it is well known, this methodology proposes a sequence of steps the client is supposed to learn and follow when he(she) is confronted with career decision making tasks. Among others, the problem is that this sequence is applied to any kind of client regardless of his(her)

developmental status. Young adults or adults tend to resist to such a structured and rationalist proposal preferring to follow his(her) own idiosyncratic method. Naturally these strategies do not work with clients with a high developmental status. On the other hand, in spite of the preponderance of the self-control rationalist ideology, they might be useful in various situations, mainly with younger clients who might not have had the opportunity of learning some basic routines and those in need of a high level of activities structure which matches best with low levels of conceptual development. With regard to what respect effectiveness the instructive strategies prove to be able to produce change but are powerless concerning the maintenance and generalization of acquisitions (easy comes easy goes...).

(d) *re-constructive exploration.*

This last group of strategies results from the convergence of different psychological intervention approaches including constructivist cognitivism, psychoanalytical orientations, and the systemic or the genetic constructivist models. All these approaches share a structural and developmental conception of the psychological subject. At the intervention level the consequence is the evolution from a short term to a long term benefits perspective. Of course we are referring to deeper changes, *i.e.*, more ambitious objectives that take much more time to be accomplished. The developmental feature is central for these strategies and reinforces their psychological essence. Indeed the analysis of the process of development as a change through time allowed the identification of the main elements of "spontaneous" psychological change. The aim of exploration approaches is the re-creation of these elements or processes in the context of psychological intervention in order to activate them. In addition the process of change is conceptualized in dialectical and dynamic terms. The resolution of the present situation of the client occurs through its overcoming realized in a new synthesis between individual and milieu (including significant others) structures, leading to the re-organization of both.

That is what we call exploration of career commitment. As exposed, these strategies direct their intentionality to the processes of change and development rather than to the contents as it was the case with the latter. The intervention content or its raw material is life (life experiences): their experiencing, expression and integration. The instructive strategies tend to use simulation and role playing activities. On the contrary, the exploration strategies prefer reality live experiences, the so-called role taking opportunities in order to stimulate the "natural" logic of human development. It is from this point of view that it might make sense to claim the idea of bringing life into career guidance interventions instead of tests, information, and discrete skills training. So far, this argumentation has been developed inside the limits of the discussion on methodology of psychological intervention but it will be certainly reinforced if we consider the rapid and dramatic changes that are occurring in the training and labour markets in our societies.

Components of re-constructive exploration strategies

Finally which are the main ingredients of this re-constructive exploration approach?

(a) The first of all is *action experience*.

It is important that the client has the opportunity to get involved in significant life experiences. If we think of adolescents and youngsters we will agree on the conclusion that quality experiences of direct confrontation with the world of work are unusual, which is reflected on the quality of their career commitments. These life experiences should obey to certain conditions.

They should contain some elements of novelty, which is the essence of the process of career exploration. The adolescent should be given the opportunity to go out of his(her) usual ghettos. In fact, the family, the school, the neighborhood, the social class, the ethnic group, the peer group, not forgetting the age and gender groups, provide some exploration possibilities but obstruct many others. If the adolescent is limited to these opportunities the tendency is the repetion and reproduction of social influences and determinations. On the contrary, the variation of ghettos, *i.e.*, the opportunity of getting involved in *new* experiences, interactions and encounters may contribute to the opposite effect. The same happens at the individual level: the adolescent representation of the world of work — in what respects both content and process — allows some exploration and action initiatives but prevents many others. Again the adolescent is locked in his(her) constructions and limited in his development. It is well known how these adolescents` representations of the world of work are simplistic and stereotyped. It is through the confrontation with the vocational world that they might have the opportunity to transform their relationship with the vocational domain and re-organize their cognitive representations and structures, opening new avenues for richer career commitments.

Secondly these experiences should be challenging, imply effort and emotional involvement and be articulated with the accomplishment of a personal goal. It should be noticed that the extension of challenge has an optimum level beneath and beyond which the experience loses developmental quality.

This global formulation allows for calling for a variety of situations and life experiences such as work experiences, visits to enterprises and companies, work shadowing, interviews to professionals, which may be considered as common experiences. The point is that they should satisfy the requisites just mentioned: novelty, personal meaning, challenge, emotional involvement, effort and compromise. Preferably these experiences should include real actions in natural contexts, that is, the performance of real roles in real contexts (role taking).

(b) The second ingredient is *integration* of such experiences. In this moment the intervention process proceeds to the expression, discussion and reflection through the analysis

and differentiation of aspects and perspectives on those experiences, exploration of beliefs, expectations, perceptions, feelings, fears, modes of coping with difficult situations, according to the different dimensions of psychological functioning: cognitive, emotional-affective, and behavioral. There are diversified ways of realizing the integration: peer group discussion guided by the psychologist, socratic dialogue between the client and the psychologist or the elaboration of reports or diaries. Actually, the discussion, the dialogue or the writing activity, offer the adolescent privileged occasions of reflection, self-world exploration, and production of personal meanings. This second component appears to be a structuring moment of the intervention strategy where conditions can be created for successive restructurations and re-equilibrations of his (her) relationship with the vocational reality. Other significant life experiences, besides those directly provided by the intervention, can and should also be explored and integrated during these occasions. In developmental terms this is the moment where events can be transformed into structure. Research has demonstrated unambiguously the indispensable nature of the integration component. In fact the mere accumulation of experiences proved to be so unproductive, in developmental terms, as their scarcity if they are not the object of psychological work that might allow for richer, more complex and flexible constructions from the part of the client. The same is true for exclusively reflexive methodologies which show to be powerless concerning the promotion of personal career development in the absence of significant life experiences. It is therefore necessary a *balance* between action experiences and their integration. This balance is also important at the temporal level, *i.e.*, the intervention should alternate between moments of action and moments of integration, for instance on a weekly basis.

(c) The third component of these strategies is the *relationship*. It is generally considered that the quality of the psychologist-client relationship is a determinant element of the client's change and development. From this point of view the relationship provides not only the intervention context but also an intervention strategy. The underlying assumption is the essentially interactive nature of the process of psychological construction, including the self, since its earliest phases of development. In fact the developmental process requires interpersonal significant relationships, emotionally invested, where safety, trust and support is perceived and felt by the client. It is in the context of an attachment with these characteristics that he(she) finds the favourable conditions for expression, exploration and integration of his(her) ongoing experiences and the necessary support for the risks involved in the trial of new alternatives of thinking, feeling, and acting. However support is not enough. The exclusive supplying of support may facilitate the client's passive accommodation to the present, and often comfortable situation, and for that very reason decrease his(her) motivation for exploration and change. Here the balance is between support and challenge as a function of the different objectives and tasks of the psychological intervention process.

(d) the last component is *temporal continuity*. The re-constructive exploration strategy points, as we could see, to deep changes in the client's personal system, combining experience and integration in the context of significant relationships. Being the objectives so ambitious it is not surprising that the interventions require time for their effectiveness. The effectiveness evaluations have shown that interventions lasting six months or less do not prove to be able to produce evident developmental outcomes. The logic is not one of adding information, behaviors or skills to the client's actual repertoire but one of transforming his(her) self-organization and his(her) rules of functioning.

As exposed the re-constructive exploration strategies are those that best fit the goal of promoting the exploration of the client's career commitment.

Processes of psychological change

The last dimension that will be referred to regards the point of convergence between objectives and strategies within the general intervention methodology that illustrates this approach. The question is: how does the change operates in the client's personal system and which is its nature?

Briefly our reflection allowed for the development of a theory of psychological change where two main perspectives can be differentiated:

(a) the first one follows a positive, *continuous* and quantitative heuristics (increase of behaviors or skills repertoire, the strengthening or weakening of a behavior — in terms of intensity, frequency or duration —, acquisition of information, substitution of dysfunctional behaviors or cognitions by more adaptive ones, etc.);

(b) the second perspective follows a negative, *discontinuous* heuristics, stressing qualitative changes, claiming that psychological change, learning, and development occur *via* the error, the conflict, the epistemological obstacle, the disequilibrium, the risk. In this case the processes of psychological change are not formulated in terms of conditioning, extinction, skills training, information processing, persuasion, etc., as in the latter case, but in terms of dialectical processes: exploration/commitment, cognitive-emotional conflict/re-equilibration, decentration/compensation, differentiation/integration, random variation/selective retention and elimination, crisis/re-organization, or thesis/antithesis/synthesis.

The articulation of the second group of psychological change processes with the objective of exploration of career commitment and with the strategy of re-constructive exploration is quite obvious. The nature of change can be qualified as deep or second-order contrasting with first order or peripheral change. The former implies the transformation of the

client's idiosyncratic structure and is associated with middle and long term changes. Contrarily to the first order changes, the second order ones do not result from the direct intervention in what is supposed to be modified. As stated earlier they result from an intervention on the processes involved in the "natural" logic of development without directing it, using the strategy of action-integration-   -relation as a means to stimulate the client's self-constructor potential. Putting the issue in a different way, the client's psychological logic is envisaged as a *cosmos*, *i.e.*, natural, self-organized order that the intervention strategy respects, considers and attempts to activate. When an intervention strategy behaves as a *taxis, i.e.*, artificial hetero-produced order as a result of rational planning, the intervention tends to be impositive, prescriptive and corrective, suggesting modes of functioning strange to the client's natural organization.

Conclusion

Concluding, our goal was to share our general methodology of organizing career psychological interventions, attempting to differentiate the main dimensions of the intervention process, and articulating them in a consistent way, that is, discussing relationships between the general objective of exploration of career commitment, the structuring moments of the intervention process, the strategies of re-constructive exploration and the discontinuous processes of psychological change, from the point of view of matching the logic of the intervention with the logic of psychological functioning and development. The next step is the work with the client.