

Career guidance in multicultural societies: identity, alterity, epiphanies and pitfalls

Ronald G. Sultana

To cite this article: Ronald G. Sultana (2017) Career guidance in multicultural societies: identity, alterity, epiphanies and pitfalls, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 45:5, 451-462, DOI: [10.1080/03069885.2017.1348486](https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2017.1348486)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2017.1348486>



Published online: 11 Jul 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 154



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Career guidance in multicultural societies: identity, alterity, epiphanies and pitfalls

Ronald G. Sultana

Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research, University of Malta, Msida, Malta

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a scoping approach to the issue of career guidance in multicultural societies. It starts off by exploring the meaning of ‘culture’, moving away from ‘back-pack’ approaches that consider culture as a set of worldviews and dispositions that are readily shed or put on, to anthropological understandings of culture as deeply held ways of meaning making that permeate all levels of one’s life and one’s relationship with others. Such complex approaches to culture challenge career guidance workers to problematise notions they hold of themselves and of others, and to face up to the challenge of alterity. In effecting this troubling reaching inwards and reaching outwards, and in striving for the epiphany of ‘knowing’, a number of pitfalls need to be acknowledged and overcome. These include our own incipient monoculturalism, the romanticisation, essentialisation and exoticisation of culture, as well as restricted notions of equality.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 December 2016
Revised 23 May 2017
Accepted 26 June 2017

KEYWORDS

Career guidance;
multiculturalism; alterity;
reasonable accommodation

Introduction

In the 1965 film, the *Sound of Music*, based on the Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musical, one of the memorable songs has the nanny Maria – portrayed by the inimitable Julie Andrews – teach her protégés – who in real life went on to become the famous von Trapp Family Singers – the fundamentals of the *soffège*: ‘Let’s start at the very beginning’, Maria warbles with a pristine Alpine Salzburg in the background, ‘a very good place to start’. In trying to understand how we can offer career guidance services in multicultural societies, confronting the meaning of the notion ‘culture’ does indeed seem like a good starting point. And in considering culture, this article inevitably stresses the ways in which ‘who I am’ – the ‘me’ which, with inadvertent intimations of identity in reflexive modernity, the show tune reminds us is ‘a name I call myself’ – is inextricable from the ‘culture’ in which I am born, even if we still have ‘a long long way to run’ to grasp the relationship between the two.

Understanding oneself in relation to the culture one is embedded in, however, is only part of the journey. Equally necessary for career guidance workers is the task of understanding oneself in relation to ‘the Other’. In this article, I thus goes on to make a number of reflections on the relationship between ‘identity’ and ‘alterity’, the two magnetic poles that challenge us to think through the complex task of ‘being’ and ‘acting’ in contexts marked by diversity while striving to live in harmony. Here the notion of ‘epiphany’ captures the wonder and awe that accompany the acknowledgement of the ‘Other’, seen as an end, not as a means to an end, in front of whom we ‘tremble’ in response to the transcendent call for dignity and respect (Levinas, 1989). The call, in our case, is to go beyond ‘toleration’ of difference to responses that make deeper demands on us, in terms of equality,

respect and recognition (Taylor, 1992), instilling in place ‘acceptance pluralism’ (Dobbernack & Modood, 2011).

Responding to such a call, however, is riven with difficulties and pitfalls that even the best-intentioned career guidance worker will need to carefully consider. This article therefore concludes by drawing on lessons learnt from my own international experience as researcher, policy analyst and trainer in order to highlight five such pitfalls that those of us attempting to provide culturally-sensitive career guidance services need to wrestle with. Before any of these aspects are addressed, however, it is important to clarify what we might mean by ‘culture’.

Culture: me, myself and the ‘Other’

‘Culture’ is very much a contested notion, and has been described as ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’ (Williams, 1983, p. 87) and ‘one of the most complex ideas in academic use today’ (Beldo, 2010, p. 144). However, anthropologists and sociologists, who specialise in constructing ways of seeing – and making sense of – the way humans live their lives in groups, generally define ‘culture’ as the total way of life of a people, a social legacy that is developed and nurtured over time and which a group passes on to individuals through a variety of ways. Language, stories, myths, proverbs, institutions, rituals, traditions, tools, clothing: one and all constitute a storehouse of pooled learning that communicate to newcomers in the group ways of thinking, feeling, believing and acting (Jenks, 1993). In many ways, therefore, culture is a precipitate of history, where a group develops a set of orientations and strategies in dealing with recurrent problems and challenges, whether arising from within or outside the immediate environment. Such experiences and orientations, sedimented in the collective memory of the group and in the institutions and rituals established over time, provide a behavioural map or sieve through which new experiences are apprehended and dealt with. In the words of one of the most renowned contemporary anthropologists, ‘culture’ is the forum where a community negotiates meaning, and where human beings are ‘suspended in webs of significance’ they themselves have spun (Geertz, 1973). Or as Charles Taylor, a leading contemporary philosopher on interculturalism, puts it, ‘man’ is ‘a self-interpreting animal’, ‘always partly constituted by self-interpretation’ (1985, p. 72).

As an individual ‘thrown’ into this web of significance that has been spun by my forebears, I am a both an heir and co-creator of the accumulated wisdom (and prejudices, one might add) of my community. ‘Culture’ thus acts as a complex matrix providing an extensive repertoire of behavioural responses into which I, as a member of the group, become initiated, inducted and socialised. Indeed, so intimately familiar do such responses become that they are often drawn upon instinctively, without much awareness that I am doing so, let alone considering that other responses are possible. Our socialisation thus constitutes what Sue (2004) has referred to as an ‘invisible veil’, difficult to see, but through which we do all the ‘seeing’. In evolutionary terms, such deep cultural immersion can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. In times of stability, and especially when a community is isolated from others, cultural conservatism is likely to enhance group cohesion, thanks to an all-embracing meaning-making context that also serves to produce and reproduce social relations – including power hierarchies – over time. Total cultural immersion, to the extent that that is at all possible, can also be dysfunctional when it stifles the possibility of generating new responses to hitherto unknown challenges, or when it considers other responses, made by other meaning-making groups, as necessarily a threat, even a declaration of war, leading to what Huntington (1992) would call a ‘clash of civilisations’.

In contrast to such a mind-set, which sees difference as a threat, is one that considers the ‘Other’ as an important and complementary variant in humanity’s response to ‘being in the world’. Parekh (2000, p. 167), a key player in the development of multicultural policies in the UK, articulated such a position with clarity and conviction when he argued that

every culture realizes a limited range of [human capacities and values] and neglects, marginalizes and suppresses others. However rich it may be, no culture embodies all that is valuable in human life and develops the full range

of human possibilities. Different cultures thus correct and complement each other, expand each other's horizon of thought and alert each other to new forms of human fulfilment. The value of other cultures is independent of whether or not they are options for us ... inassimilable otherness challenges us intellectually and morally, stretches our imagination, and compels us to recognize the limits of our categories of thought.

How we relate to the 'Other' is therefore highly dependent on how we think of 'culture' in general, and our own 'culture' in particular, and the extent to which we consider diversity as a threat or as a treat. The example of our 'mother tongue' is very useful in helping deepen our understanding of both 'identity' and 'alterity', and the relationships between both. As human beings, we learn a language that has already been shaped by preceding communities over centuries if not millennia. In highly significant ways, this linguistic template determines the manner in which we experience the world around us and relate to it. That determination is of course not complete: culture not only acts on and through us, but we can act back on and through the culture received, for we 'always' (some of us, it needs be said, more than others) have the option of acting differently (Giddens, 1984). As we grow older, we become increasingly self-reflexive about the way our language conditions us, and we discover new ways of using it. In this, we draw inspiration from such sources as narrative masterpieces within our own cultural and linguistic traditions, which, while using the basic implements of inherited vocabulary, grammar and syntax, nevertheless play with and even break the rules in order to produce previously unknown utterances, helping us behold the world anew. No wonder that the reactionary Plato famously banned poets from his Republic!

But we may even go a step further: by learning the language of other cultural groups, we are inspired by their worldviews and literary accomplishments in order to see the world in a different light, refracted through the lens of 'a thousand splendid suns', as the marvellous seventeenth-century poem 'Kabul', by the Persian bard Saib-e-Trabrizi, puts it (Hosseini, 2007). Learning a foreign language makes us aware of our own categories of thought, for, as the early Wittgenstein noted, the limits of our language are the limits of our world.

Epiphanies

The prospect of different cultures learning from each other's accumulated wisdom – and of acknowledging and appreciating the varied and intriguingly creative responses made by different groups across time and space to what are ultimately very similar existential challenges – is most appealing. It is certainly an improvement on the appalling but historically more frequent response to cultural difference: conquest, colonisation and assimilation. I am here assuming that, as members of a fledgling profession, we are positively disposed to multicultural critiques of mainstream career guidance, and that the striking realisation that what we take for granted in our everyday lives can appear strange, even threatening to others, has occurred. This 'epiphany' could have happened in a range of ways: for some such insightful 'dawnings' occurred when travelling overseas, for instance, or when learning a foreign language, or when striking up a close friendship with an 'Other' from a different social group.

This 'reflexivity' (Giddens, 1991), on the part of individuals and societies as a whole, which makes it impossible for us to live naively or 'pre-theoretically', is triggered by the conditions of modernity, where humanity has acquired a different sensibility in relation to the world it inhabits. The media and communications technology, the mass movements of people internationally – one and all have transformed the world into a veritable 'global village', which we behold as an object of our interpretative gaze. In such a context, it is practically inevitable that we look at ourselves 'from the outside', as it were, comparing our behaviour to that of other cultures (and species) that we see paraded in front of us ... experiencing the 'shocking' (and salutary) realisation that, for many others, it is we who are 'odd', 'weird', 'bizarre' even.

Such experiences and such self-reflexivity or 'metacognitive awareness', which Byars-Winston and Fouad (2006) have argued are absolutely crucial for any career guidance practitioner wishing to work in multicultural settings, will have thrown our taken-for-granted assumptions, values and beliefs into

question, possibly shaking our existential foundations in ways that can be as bewildering and disorienting as they can be exhilarating and liberating. They may have rendered the familiar 'strange' (in recognition of the specificity of cultures), and possibly the 'strange' familiar (in recognition of the universality of cultures) – helping us to extraordinarily experience the ordinary, relativising what we previously considered to be absolutes, obliging us to face unexamined beliefs and prejudices. When such 'difference' gets closer home, and what appears exotic and intriguing on TV or online becomes our next-door neighbour, then we are challenged in deeper, more personal and disconcerting ways.

While all inhabitants of multicultural societies are called upon to make serious and sincere efforts to meet others on their own terms, and thus to cross cultural borders, it is critical that we do not assume that such 'crossings' are the same for those from subordinate groups as they are for those in power, or that we all pay the same toll at the border. As authors writing from a Critical Race Theory perspective note, white/culturally dominant people in the global North are born into a world that is 'theirs', where *their* meanings, values, priorities, language styles, habitus and overall ways of being are so paramount, so part of the 'hegemony', that they/we take it for granted and unreflexively consider it to be 'life' and the world 'tout court' (Delgado, 1995). This is even more true for the ruling élites within the white population, groups that are identified by their social class and gender, and by their extensive command of economic, cultural and social capital.

'Whiteness' therefore is itself a property which brings with it rights and privileges, benefits and courtesies that are so intimately woven in the warp and woof of everyday life that they are practically unseen, forming part of the 'invisible veil' referred to earlier ... until, of course, one becomes politicised and understands how the very institutions that claim to be neutral and equally beneficent to all citizens – including law courts, schools and hospitals – are in fact saturated with 'whiteness'. Their very logic, language, protocols and practices, often infused rather than announced, slip like a comfortable costume on some, to the extent that they are not even aware they are wearing it, while for others it feels like a hair shirt, itching, prickly and constantly calling attention to itself. In what is a unique account of how an African immigrant to a Western country might feel when at the receiving end of a career guidance session in a Public Employment Service, Batumubwira (2005) has explained how so many aspects of the encounter – from the notion that a problem can be discussed in a formal office setting within the boundaries of a set time span, independently of the presence of the husband, to expectations of long-term personal action planning without consultation with ancestral or divine biddings – proved to be both vexing and frustrating. Needless to say, the counsellor attending to Batumubwira was as professional and well-meaning as they come, and yet even her attempt at taking diversity into account was misguided as it was informed by a dichotomous and reductionist view of culture, as if one could only be *either* 'African' or 'European', and with identity ascribed in narrow, stereotypical ways.

Developing multicultural awareness is a major challenge for the privileged and requires a conceptual and personal transformation of 'epiphanic' proportions, which might even lead one to conclude that multicultural counselling 'would gain from being practised by a professional from the same ethnic, cultural background or same country of origin as the client' (Batumubwira, 2005, p. 51). While this may not always be appropriate – refugees, for instance, might feel threatened if they are counselled by individuals hailing from the country they are fleeing from (Kattaa, 2017) – those who do offer guidance to diverse populations and minorities need to have a heightened awareness of how their position of privilege permeates and defines their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and actions (Piazza, Magnano, & Zammitti, 2017).

In contrast, the initial experience of life in the 'majority' world for marginalised, stigmatised groups is often nothing short of damningly distressing, with their world being constantly put into question, talked about, stereotyped or under political pressure, as if they need to justify their existence and difference every step of the way. *Their* efforts to 'cross borders' and to reach out to the majority culture cannot be considered comparable to those who travel the other way round: it is left-handed persons who are obliged to adapt to and 'fit' into a world made by right-handed people

with right-handed people in mind. The former will initially be confused as to why it is so difficult to open a door or twist the lid off a can while others seem to do so easily, unthinkingly and gracefully. Their initial thoughts might very well be to mentally kick themselves and take themselves to task for being so clumsy, uncoordinated, obtuse even. Women – certainly not a ‘minority’ in numbers, but in many societies often treated as such – might agonise as to why their life transitions do not follow the templates depicted in classic psychology texts, and spend hours struggling with feelings of inadequacy, guilt and remorse – until, that is, both realise that what they experience as ‘personal’ problems, deficits and failures are in fact socially provoked. The realisation by the left-handed that the world has been designed exclusively by and for right-handed people, or the recognition by women that psychological theories have been developed by males with male lives as the ‘absent centre’ (Macherey, 1978), the unspoken but omnipresent ‘referent’ (Bisseret, 1979), can be enormously liberating. It can greatly increase their sense of self-efficacy, with the target to be attacked being finally located *outside* rather than *within* the self.

Such ‘conscientisation’ (Freire, 1970), however, is only the first step: subaltern groups have to find ways of channelling their sense of outrage, their frustration and sadness in action that renders the world they inhabit fairer, more equitable and more socially just. Politicised, multicultural ‘whites’ may commit to this struggle, without however assuming that they/we can ever fully understand what it means to be from a minority, subordinate, subaltern group (Tuwihai Smith, 1999), or that they/we can truly imagine what it means to be the subject of dominant structures that render whole groups invisible and voiceless, or the target of daily ‘microaggression’, those dispiriting, disheartening, daily transactions and small (and not so small) acts of racism (and of sexism, classism, homophobia ...) that wear one down. For such minorities, especially those who are ‘beleaguered, who are being harassed all the time, having fingers pointed at them for being backward, alien, for not fitting in, for being terrorists and so on’ (Modood, 2015, p. 487), the promises made by Western democratic societies appear as so much dust in the air.

These and similar ‘epiphanic’ insights and illuminating realisations have been progressively assimilated by the career guidance field, as it collectively strives to follow other disciplines and sub-disciplines in recognising its monoculturalism, firmly rooted in Western epistemologies, ontologies and practices (Ribeiro & Fonçatti, 2017; Santos, 2007, 2014). We now have an increasing number of studies that critique career guidance and take it to task for assuming that its insights and tenets are universal, when, as Watson (2006, p. 49) has argued, theories and practices need to be deconstructed ‘in order to reconstruct them within the realities of the clients we serve’. As several authors have noted (Arthur & Collins, 2005; Arulmani, 2011; Byars-Winston & Fouad, 2006; Dwairy, 2006; Evans, 2008; Federschmidt, Temme, & Weiss, 2004; Fouad & Bingham, 1995; Launikari & Puukari, 2005; Leong & Pearce, 2011; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 1995; Sultana, 2014; Sultana, 2017a, 2017b; Sultana & Watts, 2008), key concepts as well as mainstream practices have been subjected to challenge by minority and indigenous groups, as well as by those who recognise the need to infuse the field with a more sophisticated understanding of culture, including the material and social conditions of life of subordinate groups.

Examples of such key concepts include the very notions of ‘career’ (a term that Arulmani, when referring to indigent groups in India, rejects in favour of what he calls ‘livelihood planning’), and of ‘choice’ (in lieu of necessity, survival, ‘destiny’); the centrality of work; the assumption of internal locus of control and of self-directed autonomy in making occupational choices; the unarticulated expectation to delay gratification in view of long-term career planning; the bearing of sole responsibility for life outcomes; and the separation of material from spiritual considerations of being. Examples of mainstream practices include the individual career interview; predominance of discursive strategies as the pathway to problem resolution; the maintenance of professional distance (regulated, in some instances, by a monetised relationship); an overemphasis on personal variables, such as interests and abilities, at the cost of considering environmental and contextual variables; and the articulation of solutions in terms of individual rather than collective action, often without reference

to the spiritual dimension of life (Lips-Wiersma, 2002) or the role of piety as a source of personal satisfaction at work (Ravari, Vanaki, Houmann, & Kazemnejad, 2009).

Some have attempted to understand these culturally contrasting concepts and practices in the career guidance field by drawing on Hofstede's (2001) work and organising the differences under the umbrella of 'collectivist' and 'individualist' worldviews (inter alia, Hughes & Thomas, 2005; Sultana, 2017b). This is helpful, in that it leads to questioning such central notions as 'career maturity', for instance, even if the strict binary opposition between the two mind-sets needs to be challenged (Dwairy, 2006). Others have been inspired by Foucaultian accounts of 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1994) in order to show that the so-called 'helping professions' are not innocent in terms of their effect on different groups, but that rather they encourage individuals to constitute themselves within and through systems of power, colluding, as it were, in their own subjugation (Stead & Bakker, 2010).

Several readers will have engaged with such critical literature in their search for more just, sensitive and culturally-appropriate practices when delivering career guidance services in contexts marked by diversity. In what follows, I will outline some of the pitfalls that we might encounter in this endeavour, building on deliberations and insights developed in my international work in the field. I present these as a series of reflections rather than as 'solutions' to what are, in the final analysis, quite intractable challenges that need to be carefully considered and debated within specific communities of practice.

Pitfalls

Pitfall 1: incipient racism/monoculturalism

The first pitfall I would like to highlight is the fear to acknowledge the fact that we are sometimes troubled and perturbed by difference and diversity. Particularly in the 'caring professions', it is often a taboo to openly admit to having incipient racist feelings, to being occasionally overwhelmed by the cultural difference of others in our midst. We feel guilty when we catch ourselves thinking such thoughts as: 'if "they" want to stay in our community, then they should accept to live and be like us', or 'by helping immigrants and refugees get jobs, I am discriminating against my own people'. We might also catch ourselves ready and willing to tolerate difference, but only as long as the mainstream culture is respected, and 'minority' cultures express themselves in the private sphere rather than publicly vaunting their preferences and opinions. Such thoughts are often not revealed, or at best shared only with intimate friends, out of fear that we might appear conservative or even reactionary, which is not surprising given that these views are mostly publicly expressed by populist nationalist parties and the far right. In purely sociological and anthropological terms, it seems to me to be quite 'normal' for groups, despite being themselves necessarily internally diverse, to feel unsettled and challenged when faced by diversity. After all, much of human history is marked by the building of walls around cities and settlements – a trend which seemed to be bucked by the tearing down of the iconic Berlin Wall ... only to be followed by an unprecedented spate of 'walls of shame' and fence-building (Bauman, 2016; Rice-Oxley, 2013) in the US, Greece, Hungary and Israel, to mention just a few – even if history also teaches us that this will not stop efforts to go around, over or under them, or to tear them down (Eveleigh, 2016). In 1989, there were 15 border walls globally: today there are 70 ... and counting (Jones, 2016).

The danger here is that instead of facing these 'instinctive' fears – which, it must be said, are fed by the rising wave of anti-multiculturalism across Western Europe – we suppress them either with deference to values we feel we *ought* to believe in, or worse, out of political correctness. My view is that within our professional circles, it is crucial to have the courage to articulate our fears, and allow them to be challenged by the best available arguments that support diversity. There is enough scholarship to warrant facing such fears with confidence – including in the field of career guidance (inter alia, Launikari & Puukari, 2005) – and when equipped with such powerful knowledge, our ability and

motivation to uphold multicultural values is not only strengthened but expresses itself more effectively in and through practice.

The seductions of nostalgic nationalisms, driven by the ultimately doomed project of recovering an imagined and mythic national identity seen to be under attack by the arrival of the 'hordes at our gate', need to be carefully and firmly countered by the search for a 'collective we', and to a commitment to welcome the 'Other' in the public sphere. This entails the joint re-imagining of what it means to be members of the same polity that is reconstructed to reflect the new diversity. As Modood (2015, p. 482) has argued, 'mutual citizenship involves the remaking of national identity, not its dissolution or denial'. This is therefore qualitatively different from the traditional assimilationist models – the so-called 'melting pot' where everybody has to melt white. That model had only a one-way street:

here is a society, people come into it and they try to be like what already exists. The multiculturalist concept of integration is not one-way but interactive. It is about fitting people together so that there is give and take, mutual change and the creation of something new,

an inclusive identity and not one that states: 'well, you are here, but you are not [one of us] until you are sufficiently like us' (Modood, 2005, p. 67).

Pitfall 2: romanticising culture

A related pitfall that career guidance practitioners working in multicultural contexts need to address is that of 'romanticising' culture. Here, again possibly out of fear of appearing 'racist', we fail to recognise and challenge oppressive and unjust practices in other cultures. Needless to say, this issue is complex in that our taken-for-granted assumptions of what constitutes oppression and injustice might differ greatly from that of others, leading exponents of some strands of multiculturalism to embrace normative relativism more strongly than others. Mahmood's (2005) anthropological account of the way pietist Muslim women in Cairo articulate an emancipatory reading of their lives which stands in contrast to Western liberal feminist notions is an important and, as I note in another context (Sultana, 2011), a salutary corrective in this regard, providing career guidance practitioners with much food for thought. Nevertheless, all human cultures have their dark side, and all have the tendency to create hierarchical relationships, based on gender, age, ability, (shades of) colour and all sorts of other social, physical, psychological ascriptions, imagined or real, on the basis of which, as Marx astutely noted, forms of domination and exploitation have historically been enacted.

Career guidance workers are called upon to take a stand when faced with issues arising out of different cultural traditions, such as when clients report strong pressures from their community requiring daughters to conform to restrictive gender stereotypes, or when they come across families siphoning most of the available financial and social capital in the direction a first-born male. In other instances, notions of duty and deference to authority will come in the way of what we might understand as individual rights to self-determination and self-fulfilment, in respect to the way major life decisions are made. Such issues oblige us to work in the difficult and uncomfortable liminal space of doing what, in our own cultural understanding, is normatively correct, and what is considered appropriate from the perspective of another value system.

While relativists would claim that it is difficult to argue in favour of 'objective' and 'universal' moral 'truths', this should not lead us to conclude that moral beliefs are impossible, but rather that 'if normative statements are to make sense, then they must be made with reference to common understandings of what the world is like' (Beldo, 2010, p. 146). In other words, it seems quite reasonable to me that, in a model of dialogic and inclusive (rather than assimilationist) multiculturalism where notions of national identity are reworked in ways that take cultural differences into account, every effort should be made to reach consensus around key normative positions – such as gender equity – even if this calls upon minority cultures to change their traditional views. Here, the notion of 'reasonable accommodation' as articulated by Bouchard and Taylor (2008) and Abbey (2009) seems to be relevant. In their inquiry on the future of interculturalism in Quebec, the authors

propose that core civic values are needed to ensure societal cohesion and integration – and that among the communal norms that serve as the basis of collective life are fundamental rights to life, freedom of religion, and protection against discrimination – with liberties limited only when one’s liberties breach those of another. Within this perspective, while we, as career guidance workers, are called to ‘accommodate’ differences and diversity, this does not exonerate us from taking a stand in defence of those shared values that have been *dialogically* adopted as the basis of our communal identity.

Pitfall 3: restricted notions of equality

Taking the principle of ‘reasonable accommodation’ seriously challenges career guidance workers to examine whether their practices operate with a restricted understanding of equality. Current articulations of multiculturalism invite us to go beyond previous notions of equality, which was mainly about ensuring that citizens do not experience discrimination on the basis of dimensions like race, ethnicity, gender and disability (Modood, 2015). An expanded, deeper equality requires anti-discriminatory protocols to be supplemented by the right to have one’s difference recognised and supported (and not just tolerated) in both the public and private spheres (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008).

Respect for ‘deep diversity’ (Taylor, 1996; 2012) has important implications for the kinds of career services that we develop, since it requires that there are multicultural accommodations of minorities within shared public institutions such as schools, hospitals and employment services, through adequate recognition of group identities and their cultural needs – such as the right to wear headscarves, face veils, kippas, or crosses in public places. Such public spaces and institutions and the laws and policies that regulate them are not neutral but rather, as Young (1990) has argued, and as has already been intimated earlier in this article, are structured around certain kinds of understandings and practices which prioritise some cultural values and behaviours over others, reflecting the mind-set and interests of the group that developed them in the first place – the dominant group. Multiculturalism is about accommodation and inclusion, not about banning and excluding.

Mainstream considerations of equality, accommodation and inclusion are further challenged by the epochal movements of people across the world. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2015) counts 65.3 million such forcibly displaced persons, of whom 21.3 million are refugees (more than half of whom are under the age of 18). Despite the colossal controversies that such movements have triggered across Europe, our wealthy continent has in fact only hosted 6% of the world’s displaced people, compared to 12% in the Americas, 14% in Asia and Pacific, 39% in the Middle East and North Africa, and 29% in the rest of Africa (UNHCR, 2015). Some would argue that as Europeans we should feel compelled to re-examine our limited and ‘statist’ notions of equality, which tend to take *citizenship* as the touchstone that defines rights to the social contract, including access to public services (Pisani, 2016).

Pitfall 4: exoticisation of culture

In our attempt to increase our sensitivity to diversity, it is important to avoid both ‘alpha’ and ‘beta’ biases (Dwairy, 2006). The first bias leads us to exaggerate difference between cultures, blinding us to the many shared universal features. The second bias involves denial of differences that do indeed exist between (and within) cultures. Both pitfalls are important enough to merit separate consideration in this article.

Starting first with the ‘alpha’ bias, it is pertinent to point out that many in the west have been socialised to think of ‘culture’ as necessarily exotic, distant, ‘ethnic’, even ‘outlandish’. Ethnic cuisine, adventure travel to developing countries, anthropologically-oriented TV programmes and documentaries, world music – one and all tend to reinforce notions of the ‘otherness’ and ‘strangeness’ of the other, and the exotic nature of culture that we seem to want to both (anthropophagically) consume and (anthropoemically) spew out. This has at least two potentially deleterious effects on our

efforts to develop multiculturally-appropriate career guidance. The first is to give the impression that cultures are incommensurable, thus rendering cross-cultural communication practically impossible and closing down the conversation about dialogic multiculturalism before it has even started. The second is to focus our attention on the 'folksy' and colourful dimensions of culture, potentially blinding us to the *range* of diversities that we encounter in our field. Such diversities are linked not only to national cultures, but also to cultures of different groups within the same country, groups that have grown up in rural rather than in urban settings, who belong to different social classes, genders, age or religion, or who have different educational backgrounds.

It is important to note that while initial approaches to multiculturalism tended to stress race or ethnicity, more recent views highlight the power dynamics and interactions between different forms of oppression and discrimination. There is now a greater appreciation of the ways in which ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, disability and religious belief are dimensions that interact and intersect in the lives of individuals (Crenshaw, 2008). Career guidance services that are committed to this broader, intersectional view of multiculturalism are prepared to challenge bias, power differences and inequalities in the knowledge that as long as one group is the target of discrimination, then others remain vulnerable (West, 1999).

Pitfall 5: cultural essentialism and reductionism

A related bias and pitfall when it comes to providing appropriate guidance services in societies marked by diversity involves thinking of culture in a stereotypical and generalising manner, rendering us unable to acknowledge the differences and variations *within* the same culture – what I have referred to as a 'beta' bias. A broader conception of multiculturalism, as argued for here, helps us avoid what is commonly called cultural 'essentialism' and 'reductionism', that is, the danger of reducing individuals' multifaceted lives to a single attribute (e.g. thinking of a client or clients only, or predominantly in terms of their ethnicity), and assuming all members of a particular group are the same.

Human beings, and human identities in multicultural societies, have complex, hybrid, 'hyphenated', multiple identities. As Cantle (2016) has noted, there is an increasing trend internationally for people, and especially so the young, to think of themselves not so much in terms of their national identity, but rather define themselves in relation to region, local place, brands, friendship, social media and in many other ways. He criticises the practice of placing individuals in predetermined identity 'boxes' which reinforce bounded identities, 'a tick-box classification which homogenizes communities under a single aspect of their identities' (p. 8).

This is not a question of simply extending the number of categories which, Cantle argues, quoting Sen (2006, p. 156), only results in 'plural monoculturalism', a simple retention, by extension, 'of the notion of bounded and settled identities'. Sen has noted that such reductionist practices result in the 'miniaturisation' of people and their identities, pointing out that the 'illusion of a unique identity' is part of the process in which conflict and violence are sustained today: 'the world is increasingly divided between religions (or "cultures" or "civilizations"), which ignore the relevance of other ways in which people see themselves through class, gender, profession, language, literature, science, music, morals or politics' (Sen, 2006, p. 175).

It is also increasingly acknowledged that identities have a developmental nature: that is, they develop over time with individuals and groups adopting some aspects and markers of particular identities over others. We thus need to recognise, as Modood (2015, p. 482) has been careful to point out that true multiculturalism is not just about ensuring that individuals and groups are not obliged or pressured to assimilate, but that also there should not be 'any hindrance against uncoercive social processes of assimilation or self-chosen assimilation'. He goes on to note:

It is true that some people of immigration origin say, 'look, forget my background I just want to be like everybody else'. There is nothing wrong with that, multiculturalists are not tut-tutting about that. No one should be pressured to efface the identities that matter to them; but, if they do not matter to them, if they are happy for them to fade away, then that is good too.

Conclusion

This article, within its limits, has focused on the ‘what’ and ‘why’ rather than the ‘how’ of culturally-sensitive career guidance. The challenge to develop culturally-appropriate practices is of course immensely important, and ultimately is the one that counts at the chalkface of service delivery. But, it could also be argued that the development of career guidance that is truly inclusive of diversity cannot happen without the conceptual and normative building blocks such as the ones discussed in this article, providing as these do the setting for interculturalism to develop. Hopefully, the critical consideration of culture, of identity and alterity, and of the pitfalls that we all have to face in being and acting in interculturally enabling ways will have provided additional food for thought in the journey of ‘becomings’, increasing the likelihood of upright behaviour through constant monitoring of the ways in which our perspectives about others are shaped by our own culture/s.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Ronald G. Sultana is a professor of sociology and comparative education at the University of Malta, where he is a founding director of the Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research. His work focuses on the relationship between education and employment, especially career education and guidance. Over the past fifteen years, he has carried out a number of comparative studies of career guidance policies across Europe, and in the Arab world, and was a consulting expert to several organisations. He has recently published “Career Guidance and Livelihood Planning Across the Mediterranean” (Sense, 2017), and, together with Tristram Hooley and Rie Thomsen is co-editing two volumes on “Career Guidance and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Neoliberal World” (Routledge, 2017 and 2018). A list of his publications is available at www.um.edu.mt/emcer/publications.

References

- Abbey, R. (2009). Plus ça change: Charles Taylor on accommodating Quebec’s minority cultures. *Thesis Eleven*, 99, 71–92.
- Arthur, N., & Collins, S. (2005). *Culture-infused counselling: Celebrating the Canadian mosaic*. Calgary: Counselling Concepts.
- Arulmani, G. (2011). Striking the right note: The cultural preparedness approach to developing resonant career guidance programmes. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 11, 79–93.
- Batumubwira, A. (2005). An immigrant’s voice – complexity of the client-counsellor relation. In M. Launikari & S. Puukari (Eds.), *Multicultural guidance and counselling – theoretical foundations and best practices in Europe* (pp. 45–54). Finland: Centre for International Mobility CIMO & Institute for Educational Research.
- Bauman, Z. (2016). No more walls in Europe: tear them down! *Social Europe*, 27 July. Retrieved from <https://www.socialeurope.eu/2016/07/no-walls-europe-tear/>
- Beldo, L. (2010). Concept of culture. In H. J. Birx (Ed.), *21st century anthropology: A reference handbook* (pp. 144–152). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bisseret, N. (1979). *Education, class language and ideology*. Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bouchard, G., & Taylor, C. (co-commissioners) (2008). *Building the future – a time for reconciliation*. Quebec: Commission de Consultation sur les Pratiques d’Accommodement Reliées aux Différences Culturelles.
- Byars-Winston, A. M., & Fouad, N. A. (2006). Metacognition and multicultural competence: Expanding the culturally appropriate career counseling model. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 54, 197–201.
- Cantle, T. (2016). Interculturalism: ‘Learning to live in diversity’. *Ethnicities*, 16(3), 471–479.
- Crenshaw, W. K. (2008). Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In A. Bailey & C. Cuomo (Eds.), *The feminist philosophy reader* (pp. 279–309). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Delgado, R. (1995). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Dobbernack, J., & Modood, T. (2011). *Tolerance and cultural diversity in Europe: Theoretical perspectives and contemporary developments*. Florence: European University Institute. Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies. Retrieved from <http://www.eui.eu/Documents/RSCAS/Research/MWG/201011/05-11-Triandafyllidou.pdf>
- Dwairy, M. (2006). *Counseling and psychotherapy with Arabs and Muslims: A culturally sensitive approach*. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Evans, K. (2008). *Gaining cultural competence in career counseling*. Boston, MA: Lahask Press.

- Eveleigh, D. (2016). What history teaches us about walls. *The International New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/28/upshot/what-history-teaches-us-about-walls.html?_r=0
- Federschmidt, K., Temme, K., & Weiss, H. (2004). *Workbook on intercultural pastoral care and counselling*. Dusseldorf: Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling. Retrieved from <http://www.federschmidt.net/workbook/workbook-final1.pdf>
- Fouad, N. A., & Bingham, R. P. (1995). Career counselling with racial and ethnic minorities. In W. B. Walsh & S. J. Osipow (Eds.), *Handbook of vocational psychology: Theory, research and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 331–365). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Foucault, M. (1994). Technologies of the self. In P. Rabinow & N. Rose (Eds.), *The essential Foucault* (pp. 145–169). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. London: Fontana Press.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society. Outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity. Self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hosseini, K. (2007). *A thousand splendid suns*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.
- Hughes, C., & Thomas, T. (2005). Individualism and collectivism: A framework for examining career programs through a cultural lens. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 14(1), 41–50.
- Huntington, S. (1992). *The clash of civilizations?*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.
- Jenks, C. (1993). *Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, R. (2016). *Violent borders: Refugees and the right to move*. London: Verso.
- Kattaa, M. (2017). Syrian refugees in Jordan: Providing career guidance services and enhancing access to employment. In R. G. Sultana (Ed.), *Career guidance and livelihood planning: Challenging transitions in South Europe and the MENA region* (pp. 87–106). Rotterdam: Sense.
- Launikari, M., & Puukari, S. (Eds.). (2005). *Multicultural guidance and counselling – theoretical foundations and best practices in Europe*. Finland: Centre for International Mobility CIMO & Institute for Educational Research. Retrieved from http://www.cimo.fi/instancedata/prime_product_julkaisu/cimo/embeds/cimowwwstructure/15622_multicultural_guidance_and_counselling.pdf
- Leong, F. T. L., & Pearce, M. (2011). Desiderata: Towards indigenous models of vocational psychology. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 11, 65–77.
- Levinas, E. (1989). In S. Hand (Ed.), *The Levinas reader*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Lips-Wiersma, M. (2002). The influence of spiritual 'meaning-making' on career behavior. *Journal of Management Development*, 21(7), 497–520.
- Macherey, P. (1978). *A theory of literary production*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Modood, T. (2005). A defence of multiculturalism. *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 29, 62–71.
- Modood, T. (2015). What is multiculturalism and what can it learn from interculturalism. *Ethnicities*, 16(3), 480–489.
- Parekh, B. (2000). *Rethinking multiculturalism: Cultural diversity and political theory*. London: Palgrave.
- Piazza, R., Magnano, P., & Zammitti, A. (2017). Career guidance in multicultural contexts: An Italian case study. In R. G. Sultana (Ed.), *Career guidance and livelihood planning: Challenging transitions in South Europe and the MENA region* (pp. 351–370). Rotterdam: Sense.
- Pisani, M. (2016). 'Illegal bodies' on the move – A critical look at forced migration towards social justice for young asylum-seekers. In Council of Europe *Healthy Europe: Confidence and uncertainty for young people in contemporary Europe. Perspectives on youth, Volume 3* (pp. 83–98). European Commission and Council of Europe.
- Ponterotto, J. G., Casas, J. M., Suzuki, L. A., & Alexander, C.M. (Eds.). (1995). *Handbook of multicultural counselling*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ravari, A., Vanaki, Z., Houmann, H., & Kazemnejad, A. (2009). Spiritual job satisfaction in an Iranian nursing context. *Nursing Ethics*, 16(1), 19–30.
- Ribeiro, M. A., & Fonçatti, G. O. S. (2017). The gap between theory and reality as a generator of social injustice: Seeking to confront social inequality in Brazil through career guidance. In T. Hooley, R. G. Sultana, & R. Thomsen (Eds.), *Career guidance and social justice in neoliberal times*. London: Routledge (in press).
- Rice-Oxley, M. (2013, Tuesday November 19). Our walled world. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2013/nov/walls#korea>
- Santos, B. S. (2007). *Another knowledge is possible. Beyond northern epistemologies*. London: Verso.
- Santos, B. S. (2014). *Epistemologies of the south: Justice against epistemicide*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Sen, A. (2006). *Identity and violence*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Stead, G. B., & Bakker, T. M. (2010). Self in career theory and counselling: A discourse analysis perspective. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 38(1), 45–60.

- Sue, D. (2004). Whiteness and ethnocentric monoculturalism: Making the 'invisible' visible. *American Psychologist*, 59(8), 761–769.
- Sultana, R. G. (2011). On being a 'boundary person': Mediating between the global and the local in career guidance policy learning. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 9(2), 265–284.
- Sultana, R. G. (2014). Livelihood planning and career guidance in Palestine and the broader MENA region. *International Review of Education*, 60, 177–197.
- Sultana, R. G. (Ed.). (2017a). *Career guidance and livelihood planning: Challenging transitions in South Europe and the MENA region*. Rotterdam.
- Sultana, R. G. (2017b). Contexts matter: Factors influencing career guidance in the Mediterranean region. In R. G. Sultana (Ed.), *Career guidance and livelihood planning: Challenging transitions in South Europe and the MENA region* (pp. 19–54). Rotterdam: Sense.
- Sultana, R. G., & Watts, A. G. (2008). Career guidance in the Middle East and North Africa. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 8(1), 19–34.
- Taylor, C. (1985). *Human agency and language: Philosophical papers 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1992). The politics of recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition* (pp. 25–73). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1996). Deep diversity and the future of Canada. In D. M. Hayne (Ed.), *Can Canada survive? Under what terms and conditions? Volume 7* (pp. 29–35). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Taylor, C. (2012). Interculturalism or multiculturalism? *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 38(4–5), 413–423.
- Tuwihai Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- UNHCR. (2015). Figures at a glance. The United Nations Refugee Agency. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>
- Watson, M. B. (2006). Career counselling theory, culture and constructivism. In M. McMahon & W. Patton (Eds.), *Career counselling: Constructivist approaches* (pp. 45–56). London: Routledge.
- West, C. (1999). *The Cornel West reader*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books.
- Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. [revised edition].
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.