Cultural sensitivity in times of migration – the (im)possible claim?
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Introduction

This paper addresses the complex issues of cultural sensitivity in career guidance and counselling (CGC) practice in the context of contemporary patterns of migration. The claim for cultural sensitivity is strong within the CGC field, reflected in CGC theories and models and the notion of the multicultural competent counselors (c.f Arulmani, 2014; Arthur & Collins, 2011). Attention to culture is regarded as ‘an essential component of counselors’ work with all clients’ (Collins, Arthur & Wong-Wylie, 2010, p 340) and the importance of counselors’ self-knowledge and self-reflections to develop a culturally sensitive working alliance are emphasized (c.f Arthur & Collins, 2011). Empathy as counsellors’ key for attunement to clients’ world views (culture) can also be regarded as an essential component in CGC.

Career counsellors’ sensitivity for clients who either by choice or compulsion occupy the migrant position is of particular importance today. Cultural sensitivity in this sense has a broader meaning than merely an attunement to individuals’ cultural context: it is about awareness about how these global trends affect individuals’ meaning making about the future. Studies show that the central meaning making resource for students with a migrant background is the emotion of not belonging in the new context (Lund, 2015; Sundelin, 2015). In other words, migration has a significant impact on individuals’ career narratives and thereby influences and challenges the career counselling practice.

Following this, counsellors need to develop cultural sensitivity to the impact of migration on clients’ career narratives. The claim for cultural sensitivity though seems to clash with the conditions of migration in the career counselling practice and create an emotional dilemma for counsellors. This dilemma is presented in the paper with examples from empirical studies of
career counselling conversations with young migrants and finally, some strategies for the CGC practice are suggested.

**Cultural sensitivity in CGC with migrants**

Language is inherently ambiguous and we can rarely be absolutely sure of what others mean in conversations. In intercultural meetings it may be particularly difficult to perceive the reactions and feelings of others. People who are very different from each other can simply have difficulties with their conclusions about what the other think and feel, or in other words, to use their empathetic ability. My study (Sundelin, 2015) of CGC conversations with newly arrived students in Sweden showed that the career counsellors had some difficulties in perceiving when the students made their migration background relevant to their future. This is exemplified in the following short transcript (S=Student, C=Counsellor):

S  It's good for me to have practice, I feel better.
C  So, practice is a bit important and that you get a profession that feels good.
S  Then I will be in the community, with the people.
C  If you would like to spend a year on the Language Introduction course, you think you would feel safer about going to the Social Program, if you would be better off, so you don’t feel it would be so difficult to go to the social program? (Sundelin, 2015, p170):

When the student talks about the importance of belonging to his new context as an important factor for the future, to the counsellor it becomes a question of choosing a study direction that the student is capable of in terms of knowledge.

Counsellors may have certain difficulties in perceiving when clients introduce their migration experience in their meaning making about the future. In so doing, counsellors are at risk to not perceive or take into account the students’ “lived experiences” (Trondman, 2001), i.e., under which conditions their clients are creating a future. Because of the seemingly inbuilt difficulties in these intercultural meetings to perceive the feelings and reactions of the other, central aspects of an individual’s meaning-making may be overlooked. This implies that counsellors would need to develop their sensitivity for migration as meaning-making condition for the future.
Cultural sensitivity as an emotional dilemma

On the one hand, the requirement for cultural sensitivity in CGC conversations is consistent, and not least important, with the needs of clients with migration background. On the other hand, there are great challenges for counsellors in CGC meetings with clients with a migration background (Sundelin, 2015). The claim for cultural sensitivity for migration is contested by the inherent subjective and objective challenges that accompany migration, refugeeship in particular. In Sundelin (2015) migration issues constituted a discreet background rather than a prominent content in the CGC conversations. This could be understood in several ways. One counsellor tells that she can feel fear when she meets students from war-hit countries (C= Counsellor, I=Interviewer):

C ... No, but that feeling, I feel directly like this, especially when the students come from war-hit countries. Then I think- yes.
I Then you feel?
C No, but a fear for what it could mean like that.
I A fear for how they've had it or for if they start talking about it?
C No, no. If they tell it’s ok - I feel I give no follow-up questions about how that part of childhood has been. You can never imagine seeing people who are dead or parents who have been shot, such things when living in Sweden. It just does not work in any way. Then I don’t usually-. But some tell such things just automatically because you are an adult. (Sundelin, 2015, p 215)

The counsellor avoids bringing the students' background into the counselling so as not to bring awful experiences to life for the student. The counsellor also seems to feel insufficient in being able to handle the students’ experiences in the conversation. A sense of inadequacy seems to follow meetings with refugees, and risk to obscure the migration experience in the conversation.

Furthermore, with the ‘politics of belonging’ (Christensen, 2009) in terms of asylum legislations etc. in western society today follows for many migrants inhuman situations and Swedish counsellors testify that to cope with their daily work, they have to ‘turn off’ their emotional perception of refugee clients’ situation. The conditions for refugees’ career transitions are marked by extreme uncertainty, especially for those over the age of 18 and who do not have a residence permit. They can be expelled from or moved within the country at very

1 Ongoing study
short notice. The decisions about the future are far beyond the borders of the CGC setting. Counsellors describe that they have to intellectualize the situation, ie turn off their emotional understanding for their refugee clients as a shield for their own feelings, to survive themselves and to try to prevent refugee clients from losing hope for the future. They strive to be positive and install hope in hopeless situations. The expectancy of cultural sensitivity is high both in CGC theory and models and from refugee clients but difficult to live up to. The claim for cultural sensitivity in CGC seems to create an emotional dilemma for counsellors meeting refugees.

**Conclusion**

Scholars point out that while counselling provides an opportunity to contribute to social justice for migrants, this depends on whether counselling services are able to adapt their practices in relation to the challenges of migration and migrants (Bimrose & McNair, 2011; Peavy & Li, 2003). As shown, two ways of adapting CGC to migrants’ situation for career counsellors are to develop understanding of migration as an important meaning making resource for clients and attunement to migration issues in CGC conversations. A recent study (Abkhezr, 2018) also suggests a narrative approach to CGC with young people from a refugee background “as such approaches recognize the importance of cultural, contextual, relational and social considerations for understanding their career development (Abkhezr, 2018, p 177). As we have seen though, the claim for cultural sensitivity for migration seems to clash with the conditions of migration and difficult for counsellors to live up to in the CGC practice. Therefore, a third way is, in alignment with Bengtsson (2018), a call for an attentive career guidance which implies counsellors’ attention to their own emotions and reactions in order to be able to pay attention to the clients experience and voice. This in turn is a call to that career counsellors are given opportunity to explore their own thoughts and feelings about the difficult situations that many meetings with refugee clients involve. For both the sake of the counsellors and the refugees, institutions need to provide professional supervision for career counsellors working with refugees.
References


