SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

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Social justice has underpinned career development work since its inception. Over time however, while awareness of social justice issues has been retained, the focus of intervention has largely remained individual. Further, career theory has been criticised for its lack of attention to cultural influences such as gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, in people's career development. In this regard, progress has been made to the extent that multicultural and diversity competencies have been identified and elaborated. However, such competencies maintain a predominant focus on interventions with individuals and there have been calls for career development to identify social justice competencies which necessarily suggest different roles and levels of intervention for career development practitioners. As the implications of globalisation become more apparent and societal inequity is perpetuated, it is timely to revisit the social justice origins of career development and consider how career development may position itself in the 21st century. This paper examines social justice in career development theory and practice, and considers implications for career development practitioners.

> Not till society wakes up to its responsibilities and its privileges in this relation shall we be able to harvest more than a fraction of our human resources, or develop and utilize the genius and ability that are latent in each new generation. (Parsons, 1909, p. 165).

With this comment, Frank Parsons, widely regarded as the founder of career development work, summed up his commitment to all people achieving their potential and the social activism that may be required to achieve it. Vocational psychology traditionally played an important role in advocating for social justice, through the work of individuals like Frank Parsons (Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006; Hargrove, Creagh, & Kelly, 2003). Since that time, throughout the history of career development, social

activism has often lain dormant before reasserting itself (Gummere, 1988) as a responsibility of career development practitioners.

There are some historical parallels that may be made between the turbulence and dramatic social change of the time of Parsons and the present time. Once again social justice is reasserting itself as a guiding value and foundation which may take career development practice forward (Arthur, 2005a; in press; Toporek & Chope, 2006). To this end, in a special issue of the journal, *The Counseling Psychologist*, Blustein, McWhirter, and Perry's (2005) position paper prompted serious debate in the subsequent articles about social justice as a primary focus for vocational psychology. More recently Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysicar, and Israel (2006) published their *Handbook for Social Justice in Counseling Psychology*, which focuses attention on the importance of social justice to career and vocational counselling.

Definitions of social justice have varied, but socially just practice may be regarded as 'actions that contribute to the advancement of society and advocate for equal access to resources for the marginalized or less fortunate individuals in society' (O'Brien, 2001, p. 66). Whereas the meaning of social justice often refers to the access and distribution of resources, we wish to also place an emphasis on human development and the role of career development practitioners in helping individuals reach their full potential (Young, 1990). The career development of individuals does not occur in isolation. We need to be mindful of supporting individuals while fostering a better balance between the self-determinism of individuals and the needs of the community (Blustein, 2006). In a just society, opportunities, resources, and worth are distributed equitably and fairly, with no individuals or groups holding particular advantages or disadvantages in access or advancement (Fouad et al., 2006). There is considerable work to be done to operationalise the value of social justice into career development practice through an expanded scope of practices (Arthur, 2005a; in press). This paper examines the relationship between social justice and career development, and considers its implications for career development practitioners.

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Social Justice and Career Development

The beginning of the twentieth century was a time of massive societal and social change and there was an increasing divide between the rich and the poor. Many people struggled to find their way in a transformed and rapidly transforming society. Parsons and the social reformers of his time were advocates for youth, women, the poor, and the disadvantaged. Achieving social justice through vocational guidance was a focus of Parsons (Fouad et al., 2006), and to that end he established the Vocational Bureau in Boston, the first ever career guidance centre. Parsons is widely regarded as the founder of the vocational guidance movement. Parsons (1909) firmly believed that wealth and power were unequally distributed throughout society and understood his vocational guidance work with individuals in relationship to political and economic reforms of the time (Hartung & Blustein, 2002). Indeed, since that time career development's relationship with and responsiveness to social, economic and political reform is evident (e.g., Herr, 2001; Herr & Shahnasarian, 2001).

Parsons' best known contribution to career development is the identification of three elements of the matching model of career decision making, specifically self-understanding, world of work knowledge and 'true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts' (Parsons, 1909, p. 5) which underpinned his work with clients. His text, *Choosing a vocation*, is widely regarded as a seminal text in the field, and the individualised approach that he pioneered in applying his three elements has guided career development work to the present time.

In examining the relationship between social justice and career development, three issues warrant consideration. First, understandings about work, vocational guidance, and career development will be examined and the implications for theory and practice will be discussed. Second, the Eurocentric nature of career development in an increasingly globalised world will be considered. Third, the relationship between career development and the socio-political system will be examined.

Work, Vocational Guidance and Career Development

Work has played an important part in people's lives in all cultures and countries throughout history and has been conducted in a range of contexts including the home, the community and employment settings. While work underpins vocational guidance and career development, there have been theoretical shifts in meaning and definition that have influenced the direction of research and practice. For example, Richardson (1993) reflected on Parsons' notion of *choosing a vocation* as a shift away from the traditional notion of *finding a job* that brought with it a shift in vocational guidance work. As reflected in the title of his seminal text, Parsons' focus was on assisting people to find satisfying paid work—the 'right' job. A further important theoretical shift occurred in the mid-twentieth century when career and career development were considered in the context of development across the lifespan and a broad range of social and environmental influences (Richardson). In so doing, career development has valued paid work over other forms of work and has developed a middle class Euro-American focus on work that is meaningful.

It is important to understand the way in which social class forms a cultural schema that impacts upon career development values, beliefs, assumptions, aspirations, and goals (Blustein et al., 2005). Repositioning the field to assume a focus on work rather than career has been advocated (e.g., Blustein, 2006; Richardson, 1993, 2000) in order that the situation and needs of those who have traditionally been marginalised may be considered. Indeed, such a focus would better position career development internationally as middle-class Eurocentric notions of career are not applicable to the majority of the world's population whose values and circumstances may not support such an emphasis (Arthur & McMahon, 2005).

The Eurocentric Nature of Career Development

Career theory has been criticised for its Eurocentric focus and limited attention to the career development of people from non-dominant groups defined by cultural variables such as gender, social class, ability, sexual orientation, religion, or ethnicity (Patton & McMahon, 2006). To work competently with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, we need to be prepared to address issues of social justice (Parra-Cardona, Holtrop, & Córdova, 2005). As globalisation has progressed, advances in career theory and practice have recognised the need to locate career development within the broader context of individuals' lives. This is particularly evident in discussions about multicultural and diversity competencies, an area that has received substantial attention. Diversity competencies have been identified nationally and internationally (Career Industry Council of Australia, 2006; Repetto, Malik, Ferrer-Sama, Manzano, & Hiebert, 2003), and although these are important competencies, they do not go far enough in addressing the differential influence of culture on people's career development (Arthur, 2005; in press). The field is only beginning to define what it means to be competent to engage in social justice activities (Toporek et al., 2006; Toporek & Williams, 2006). At a broader level, the adoption and adaptation of Euro-American middle-class theory and practice in other countries and cultures has been questioned (Watson, 2006) and the challenge of developing new theory and practice indigenous to particular contexts has been considered (e.g., Arthur & Collins, 2005; Nicholas, Naidoo, & Pretorius, 2006; Watson & Stead, 2002). Increasing mobility between countries requires career counsellors to be familiar with frameworks that address diversity and social justice issues that emerge during international transitions (Arthur & Pedersen, 2008).

Career Development and the Socio-Political System

Through its history, career development has predominantly been provided to school leavers and the unemployed with a view to them gaining meaningful employment, and in so doing has remained true to Parson's social justice intentions. More recently, as the value of career development for all citizens has been recognised, this traditional and somewhat reactive approach to service provision has been reconsidered. Consequently, there have been calls for career development to be provided for all citizens and used proactively to assist individuals develop the skills and competencies to manage their careers across the lifespan (Watts & Fretwell, 2004). Indeed, the potential of career development as a strategy to assist in the achievement of public policy goals related to issues such as lifelong learning, ageing workforces and skills shortages has raised the profile of career

development with governments in a number of countries (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2003).

In this context, career development is positioned as an interface between individual needs and political and societal needs. At a time when career development is enjoying recognition from policy makers and has an opportunity to advance the profession from its traditionally marginalised position, consideration needs to be given to the implications of the possible socio-political location of career development which Watts (1996) contends may range from social reform to social control depending on the position it assumes. In this regard, career development practitioners play a significant social role (Richardson, 2000) which Riverin-Simard contends is 'fundamental to the quality of life of their fellow citizens' (Riverin-Simard, 2000, p. 127). Further, Richardson (2000) advocates for an approach that supports personal empowerment and is sensitive to the needs of all rather than being 'overly dominated by the needs of the economy and the prevailing power distributions' (p. 197). For example, in the context of South African career psychology, Nicholas, Naidoo and Pretorius (2006) caution against career development being co-opted to serve the agendas of the system. Such caution is worthy of consideration in light of calls both from within the field and by policy-makers for career development to develop an evidence base. The dilemmas that surround the nature of the evidence base, its purpose, whose needs it serves, and its implications for theory, research and practice are all pertinent issues.

Hartung and Blustein (2002) suggested that:

> returning to counseling's roots in the early 20th century social and political reformation movements could ultimately lead the profession to a renewed vision that comprehends career decision making and counselling as a socially situated process entailing purposeful reasoning, prudent intuition and sustained efforts at ameliorating social injustice. (p. 41)

In this regard, Irving and Malik (2005) urge career development to be viewed more broadly, to improve the lives of individuals and also to acknowledge wider social responsibilities. To understand the social contexts and opportunity structures within which career decision-making occurs suggests the possibility of a broader role for career development practitioners.

Implications for Career Development Practitioners

In reflecting on the work of Parsons, Gummere (1988) asked 'should members of the profession he created explore ways to return to his grand vision of combining individual rescue with social change?' (p. 405). Indeed, enacting a social justice philosophy in the context of a theory grounded in the concepts of self and opportunity (Irving & Malik, 2005) may seem somewhat contradictory. Hartung and Blustein (2002) contend that the development of career decision-making models and counselling approaches that attend to social justice issues is the next critical challenge for career development theory and practice. How to do this is a question career development is now grappling with as it strives to remain relevant to societies and individuals.

Throughout its history, career development has focused on intervention with individuals, and a social justice perspective does not imply that this focus should change. However, career development practitioners seeking to enact social justice values could also consider how they might 'work with broader systems and contexts to create more humane and equitable schools, universities, and work environments' (Hartung & Blustein, 2002, p. 45). Much of the current writing in the area of social justice has been focused on identifying the problems associated with current approaches to career theory and practice. However, as McWhirter, Blustein, and Perry (2005) point out, it is time to move from a denunciation approach to an annunciation approach, in which principles and processes for embracing a social justice agenda in vocational psychology are articulated.

In this regard, Arthur and McMahon (2005) proposed that the Systems Theory Framework (STF) of career development (McMahon & Patton, 1995; Patton & McMahon, 1999, Patton & McMahon, 2006) illustrated the systemic levels at which intervention may occur and also suggested that such intervention may involve different roles for career development practitioners. Practical application of the STF as a map for social justice intervention is evidenced in the work of McIlveen, Everton and Clarke (2005) who described how an Australian university career service developed a proactive response to social justice issues by engaging with the organisational dynamics, maintaining links and networks with internal and external agencies, and

providing programs that were responsive to a range of social justice issues in their context. McMahon (2007) provides a further example of systemic level intervention in describing the case of an employment assistance counsellor advocating at the organisational management level to achieve more equitable internal promotional processes for employees for whom English was not their first language.

The previous examples illustrate the potential for career development practitioners to act as change agents at organisational, institutional and societal levels (Vera & Speight, 2003) to achieve socially just outcomes for their clients. However, on a cautionary note, the interests of social justice are not necessarily always served through systemic level intervention. Fassinger and Gallor (2006) suggest that we expand our traditional models from the *scientist–practitioner* to the *scientist–practitioner–advocate* to emphasise the inclusion of training for social justice roles. However, such interventions require career development practitioners to look beyond presenting issues, symptoms and concerns and examine how they may be 'understandable as indicators of a social malaise' (Strong, 2007, p. 5). For example, beliefs such as individuals being held responsible for their own futures (Irving & Malik, 2005) and self-managing their learning and work choices may shift the focus away from the structural problems that perpetuate injustice, inequity, and disadvantage. Thus, practitioners must develop a critical consciousness and reflect on the theories and socio-political systems influencing their work. Similarly, Blustein (2006) contends that in order to develop inclusive practice a goal should be for practitioners to develop clients' critical consciousness and empowerment. For example, Strong (2007) described the example of a client seeking help for a personal issue, and how, following a 'social justice conversation' (p. 4), she sought assistance from her union for a systemic issue related to workplace practices. However Strong (2007) observed that practitioner training has a role to play in preparing practitioners for such interventions. Even though career practitioners may recognise the importance of systemic influences on the lives of their clients, they often lack training and resources on how to implement related interventions.

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Increasingly, theory has acknowledged the pervasive influence of the systems that surround individuals on their career development (e.g., Cook, O'Brien, & Heppner, 2004; Hansen, 2003; Patton & McMahon, 2006). Ivey and Collins (2003) proposed that adopting a social justice orientation requires attention to 'outreach, prevention, community service, and advocacy' (p. 298) by career development practitioners. Thus, calls have been made for the range of career development competencies required by practitioners to be expanded to include competencies related to social action and advocacy (Arthur, 2005a; in press). In this regard, Arthur (2005b) suggested that such social justice competencies relate to five domains, specifically:

1. Knowledge about the potential impacts of systemic forces, including oppression, on the presenting clients.
2. Consultation with local community groups to direct strategic planning about career development services.
3. Expansion of career development interventions to include multiple roles and multiple levels of intervention.
4. Increasing access to services and the availability of culturally appropriate career resources.
5. Professional development for increasing competencies related to social justice and career development.

The development of such competencies suggests the need to revise the training of career development practitioners, which has traditionally focused on the development of skills related to working at the micro-level with individuals and not on systemic intervention (Helms, 2003; Toporek & Williams, 2006). While career development practitioners recognise systemic influences, many have not been adequately prepared to implement social justice interventions (Arthur, in press). Additional curriculum content to address broader social and structural issues was one of the key priorities identified at a think tank on the future of career counsellor education in Canada held in November, 2006 (Burwell & Kalbfleisch, 2007). However, it was also noted that career development educators need to be updated with knowledge about social justice and resources for revising curriculum. In

relation to employment counsellors, Chope (2005) proposed the development of skills related to consulting with organisations and engaging in social action at organisational and legislative levels. Further, he suggested that interdisciplinary skills and knowledge could assist practitioners to develop greater understanding of other services such as business, public health, social work and law. Training in ethics, Chope suggested, would assist practitioners to evaluate their role as 'either change agents or bystanders in social justice concerns' (p. 7).

Career development practitioners must also necessarily position their work in the context of the organisational and socio-political system that may not be 'receptive to interventions that threaten the status quo of high-stakes holders' (Helms, 2003, p. 310) and where they may be a minority profession. In the South African context, Nicholas, Naidoo and Pretorius (2006) suggested that questions that may guide the future direction of career psychology include: 'What should our theory base be? Are our theories sufficiently sensitised to local, cultural, socioeconomic and social conditions? What should our role be and who are our clients? What values should be promoted' (p. 8). At a pragmatic level, Helms suggested that obtaining ideological or financial support from administrators or policy makers for social justice interventions may not always be possible and observed that much human service work has traditionally been voluntary. Organisational barriers may surface as the largest impediments for career practitioners to enact social justice interventions. Thus, the issue of providing accessible and affordable services to all citizens remains a challenge for career development and requires engagement at the level of public policy.

'A fundamental challenge for career development lies in its commitment to improving the lives of individuals while also acknowledging its wider social responsibilities.'

A fundamental challenge for career development lies in its commitment to improving the lives of individuals while also acknowledging its wider social responsibilities (Irving & Malik, 2005). McWhirter and colleagues (2005) point to the 'moral imperative underlying the application of a social justice lens to vocational psychology' (p. 215). In this regard, Douglas (2005) contends that career development 'must strive to obviate inequities through informing policy' (p. 38) and emphasises the importance of strong professional associations in order to do so. For example, the International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance named social justice as a foundation competency in the International Competencies for Educational and Vocational Guidance Practitioners (Repetto et al., 2003). This is a starting point from which to continue the work of articulating how the value of social justice can be translated into practice.

Conclusion

Career development has its origins in the social justice movement. However, social justice has not always been visible as a guiding principle. Even though social justice is implied in diversity and multicultural competencies, it has not always been explicitly articulated. Although competencies specific to social justice have been introduced (Arthur, 2005a, 2005b), they need to be further delineated and tested for their relevance and adoption by career development practitioners. With the advance of globalisation and the rapid pace of change, career development finds itself in a situation where it is examining its practice to remain relevant in the context of the 21st century. Consideration of career development's core value of social justice and how it may be enacted in practice may provide a way forward.

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THEORY AND PRACTICE

This section is designed as a brief professional review of the article. It provides relevant study questions and answers for readers to test their knowledge of the article.

Why think about social justice and career development and why now?

Answer: Social justice has been a core value of career development since its beginning in the early 1900s and is therefore not something new for the field to adopt. Indeed it is likely to be a core value of most career development practitioners. However, parallels may be drawn between the rapid societal change and the role of career development of the early 1900s and the present. Social justice values are not so clearly articulated and enacted now as they have been at other times in the profession's history. For example, theory and practice have been criticised for not adequately addressing the needs of marginalised groups, and their Eurocentric focus has raised questions about their applicability in all countries and cultures. Further, the influence of the sociopolitical system on the needs of individuals and on career development practice warrant consideration. There have been calls for career development to revise and re-vision its practice to remain relevant in the 21st century, and in this context it is timely to consider the place of its original core value.

What are the implications of social justice for career development practice?

Answer: One of the first implications of social justice for career development practice is for practitioners to reflect on their work through a wider lens in order to examine their practice and the needs of their clients in context. To do so will raise questions related to social justice such as the origins of theory and practice and who it best suits, the sociopolitical location of career development, and the sociopolitical location of clients' issues, needs and concerns. Such questions serve to heighten awareness that career development has traditionally focused on individual intervention and further, that individuals may be best served through systemic interventions. While in no way suggesting that the focus on individual intervention be lessened, career development practitioners may also consider broadening their roles and levels of intervention.