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## Why we need to share our ideas about connecting career development to social justice

Career professionals must come together to challenge systems that limit clients' ability to reach their potential

BY TRISTRAM HOOLEY

Life isn't fair.

The fact that life isn't fair won't be news to anyone involved in career development work. Everyone has seen a client or a student who has enormous potential, but whose life is so complex that it is impossible for them to build the career that they dream of. Or been frustrated that the educational system is so rigid or the employment or benefit regulations so limiting. And everyone has felt empathy for clients who are struggling, bullied and undervalued. But what can you do about it?

As career development superheroes, we want to empower our clients and give them the best chance to fly. We can fill them with hope and optimism, support them to tell their story, help them to decode the labour market and aid them to apply for jobs and courses. But in many cases this won't be enough. The cards are stacked against so many people.

Everyone has a career, but not all careers are equal. Maybe you are a woman facing a pay gap, which means that you only earn 87 cents for every dollar a man earns (Statistics Canada, 2019). Or perhaps you are someone born in a low socio-economic community realizing that you have less chance of achieving a university degree and a professional job than those born in the richer neighbourhood down the road. Or you might be an immigrant struggling with getting your qualifications recognized. Or someone growing up in the Global South, learning about the wealth and opportunity that exists to the north, but with little opportunity to access it.

Career is where our hopes, dreams, skills and potential interact with wider social, political and economic systems. And all too often these systems are not fair. They constrain rather than enable; they oppress rather than empower.

## Facing up to the system

The constraints that people face in their career are not just the fault of bad luck. So many people face barriers in their career because inequality is systematic and structural. People have come up with lots of names for the system that oppresses and constrains us. Some call it patriarchy, others neoliberalism, the political philosophers Hardt and Negri (2001) refer to it as “Empire” because it describes how the powerful bring the rest of us under their control. I like this terminology because of its simplicity.

Whatever you call the system, the philosopher Iris Marion Young (2004) reminds us that “For every oppressed group, there is a group that benefits from that oppression and is privileged in relation to that group.” In other words, some are kept weak, so that others can be powerful; some are poor because others have all of the wealth. Our world is carefully designed to ensure that some people find it easy to build a fantastic career, while for others it is incredibly hard to do anything beyond survive.

## The five signposts

Paying attention to the systematic oppression that exists across the world can lead us toward despair. If so much is wrong with the world, what can career development possibly do to challenge it?

In the book *Career Guidance for Emancipation*, which I co-authored with Ronald Sultana and Rie Thomsen, we drew together a range of ideas that have been articulated by researchers, practitioners and theorists and proposed the five signposts to a socially just approach to career development. If career development practitioners want to challenge oppression, help people realize their dreams and undermine corrupt systems they need to:

1. **Build critical consciousness.** Help people understand the bigger picture and not see every problem as wholly their fault and their responsibility. This is about building an understanding of students’ and clients’ situations and helping them to link these situations to the wider context;
2. **Name oppression.** Recognize the specific needs of oppressed groups, listen to their experiences and help them to identify injustice and inequities in careers. It is also about organizing in solidarity with them to ensure they can access a decent career;
3. **Question what is normal.** Spend time discussing what people assume to be normal and natural in their careers and consider where these assumptions come from;
4. **Encourage people to work together.** Facilitate social interaction, solidarity, collaboration and collective action. Help people to recognize that their friends, colleagues and communities are resources for their career and that, often, we can all move forward together;
5. **Work at a range of levels.** Recognize that career development isn’t just about work with individuals. It also

requires intervention into social systems. This includes advocating on behalf of clients when they find it difficult to represent themselves, identifying common problems experienced by multiple clients, suggesting reforms to systems and processes, and campaigning to remove systemic barriers from your clients’ careers.

## Come together, right now

The movement for social justice in career development is an international one. It is gathering pace all around the world in the UK, Norway, Brazil, India and many more countries. There is no single template, no “right” way to “do” social justice in career development. The signposts are a useful starting point, but they are designed to be inspirational rather than prescriptive.

Social justice is a movement, not a theory. It is the coming together of lots of people with lots of ideas and a desire to increase equality and expand the possibilities available to people in their career. Because of this, one of the most important things that we can do is to share our dreams, practices and frustrations. To talk about the challenges that we and our clients face and to explain things that we have done to help people overcome them.

This is why a group of us have started the Career Guidance for Social Justice website ([careerguidancesocialjustice.wordpress.com](http://careerguidancesocialjustice.wordpress.com)). It is designed as a global meeting place for career practitioners and researchers interested in social justice, as a clearing house for ideas and experiences and as a growing repository for practice, resources and materials.

If you are inspired to engage more deeply with social justice, please visit the site. We are looking for people to read, comment, write articles and spread the word. As the placards say, “there is a world to win.”



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