

## **A professional practice from a perspective of social justice**

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<https://orientaction.ceric.ca/2020/06/03/une-pratique-professionnelle-sous-langle-de-la-justice-sociale1/>*

Social justice has run through the history of career guidance practice. In the early twentieth century, Frank Parsons, a pioneer of career guidance in North America, emphasized the unequal distribution of goods and wealth in American society and pledged to help the most disadvantaged citizens.

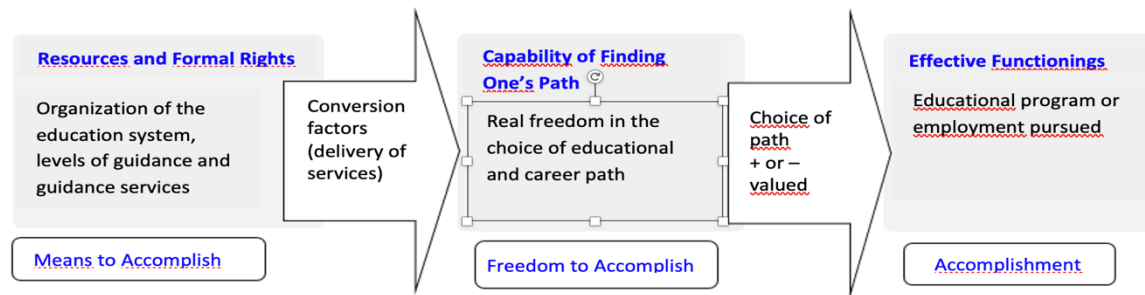
It is questionable whether social justice issues are sufficiently taken into account in the practice of career guidance. Among the theoretical works dealing with social justice, the capability approach, developed by the Nobel Prize in Economics Amartya Sen, helps to flush out situations of injustice, to explain their mechanism, as well as to open up certain avenues of intervention for more socially fair career guidance practices. According to Sen (2009), a situation is considered unfair when there is an opportunity to intervene to compensate for an inequality, when no intervention is made, or when the intervention contributes to reinforcing unequal access to a right, good or service. Under the direction of Professor France Picard, a group of researchers from University Laval and the University of Lausanne chose to illustrate how this concept can be applied to career guidance.

The concept of *capabilities applied to career guidance* is defined as the extent of the real freedoms that an individual has in his or her choice of educational program or a career, considering the course of life that he or she has reason to value (Picard *et al.*, 2015a). The formal freedoms enjoyed by individuals, such as rights enshrined in law (e.g., universal access to education in developed countries) or the availability of public resources (e.g., a policy of low university tuition fees) do not automatically translate into real freedoms for individuals. For example, beyond the formal freedom of access to education, the difficulty that some immigrant families experience in understanding the education system of the host country can contribute to obscuring the space of possibilities and limiting their children's choice of an educational program or career (real freedom more restricted for pupils or students). In short, the gap between formal freedom and real freedom makes it possible to judge the extent of capabilities.

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Figure 1: Capability of finding one's path



Source: Picard *et al.*, 2015a

As Figure 1 shows, upstream of capabilities, *resources and formal rights* are essential – but not sufficient – conditions for leading to justice, as there is no guarantee that individuals will make effective use of them, even if they are available. Are students affected by a form of inequality (socio-economic, ethno-cultural, gendered, disabled, etc.) subject to rights that are different from those of their peers? different access to or use of resources? Thus, the transition from *formal resources and rights* (means of accomplishment) to *the capability of finding one's path* (freedom to accomplish) involves the concept of *conversion factor*.

It is by converting these resources and formal rights into real possibilities (*positive conversion factor*) that an individual can increase his or her freedom and open up the field of possibilities.

What prevents a pupil or student from using an institution's resources and rights in the area of guidance (review of regulations, measures, terms and conditions for the provision of guidance services, etc.)? For example, guidance counsellors providing "accurate information" about the cost of university education and available financial assistance can become a positive conversion factor for young people who are the first in their family line to access university. Conversely, as an example of a *negative conversion factor*, a guidance counsellor considers an academic record not promising, which can contribute to cooling a student's aspirations or even constraining his or her academic choice.

Downstream of the capabilities is the *choice* of path. Helping with the decision-making process and choice is at the heart of school-based guidance practices. In the capability approach, this choice is the subject of investigation, rather than the result of good guidance practice. Thus, in order to characterize the margin of freedom associated with a choice (freedom to accomplish), the practitioner asks himself

whether the student had the possibility of doing otherwise (*capability to exit*), whether he had a say in the situation (*capability for voice*), whether constraints affected this choice and whether the choice of a training program is of value in his eyes. In the capability approach, an attempt is made to distinguish between a freely consented educational or professional choice and one formulated under the influence of gender or class stereotypes, or when educational options are limited or even non-existent. The latter refers to the concept of *adaptive preference*, whereas the individual internalizes and expresses a preference under duress, which distances him from his aspirations and diverts him from his centers.

In the process, this investigation of decision-making in choosing its own path continues with the analysis of *actual functioning* (the ways of being and acting of individuals) and *accomplishments* (what individuals achieve, all of their functioning). If certain boundaries in a student's environment were pushed (e.g., access to resources, changes to administrative rules), what potential accomplishments could they achieve academically and professionally? The *accomplishments* of individuals do not in themselves testify to the presence of injustice. For example, two students are enrolled in the same training program (the same accomplishment). The former chooses it freely, and the latter, by default. In this situation, the accomplishment is the same, but the freedom to choose (*capability*) is different.

The capability approach therefore invites us to go beyond the observations of inequalities to question injustices and reflect on how it can be otherwise. If necessary, he will implement *advocacy* actions to ensure fair access to guidance resources. In addition, in the counselling interview, he will make sure to build a deliberative space where people have the opportunity to make their voice heard (*capability for voice*) and to explain the course of life that they have reason to value. To this end, the counsellor will be attentive to the range of possibilities considered in an academic or professional decision-making, as well as to the adaptive preferences that emerge behind the formulation of a centre of interest. In short, what is aimed at in the career counselling interview is to give everyone back a real freedom of choice.

Note:

This blog is a summary of the chapter "Capabilities perspective of social justice" by Picard, Turcotte, Viviers and Dionne, published in a 2019 CERIC publication, "N. Arthur, R. Neault and M. MacMahon (Eds), Career Theories and Models at Work (p 307-318)".

