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Reflections on the Condition of Polish Counselling*

In our rapidly changing world, uncertainty about the future compels people to look for some kind of stability. Counselling and guidance are a kind of contemporary support in more effective planning of individual lives and solving problems. How can counselling and guidance be more coherent in the complex and flickering reality? In the culture of individualism and plurality of voices, what are the chances of co-operation between a counsellor and a client or among various partners involved in (public and non-public) counselling? Counselling offers a range of theories, methods and techniques, which can contribute both to deeper dialogue and to co-operation, but also can hinder dialogue. How can high quality counselling services be ensured amidst plurality of discourses and practices as well as (professional and non-professional) institutions involved in counselling?

I argue that counsellors, by conscious reflection and specific counselling activities, can reconcile the contradictions of the contemporary liquid world, which may improve everyday life.

Key words: Polish counselling, vocational guidance, career counselling

Poland has undergone a radical and multi-faceted cultural change since the Round Table debate in 1989, followed by the memorable victory of the 'Solidarity' movement in the parliamentary election on June 4th of the same year. Entrenched in the people's mentality and their everyday life, previous norms and values were confronted with new contradictory rules. The dissonance between the cultures of so-called real socialism and of democracy and market economy was exacerbated (Sztompka 2002, pp. 278-279). The new system with its three pillars – the capitalist market, democratic politics and freedom of thought – produced completely new rules. The following list of the resultant opposites was presented by Piotr Sztompka:

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Table 1. Cultural dissonance

Culture of real socialism		Democratic and market economy culture
Collectivism	↔	Individualism
Egalitarianism	↔	Meritocracy
Mediocrity	↔	Success
Certainty and safety	↔	Agency
Fate	↔	Causation
Welfare	↔	Independence
Blaming the system	↔	Taking responsibility for one's life
Passive privacy	↔	Participation in public life
Immersion in the past	↔	Orientation to the future

Cf. Sztompka 2002, p. 279.

Once set in motion, free market mechanisms brought many positive changes into the Polish economy, but they also resulted in unemployment, a new phenomenon in Poland then. This, in turn, made it urgent to analyse the market, employment, types of work, particular individuals' possibilities and predispositions as well as to look for new modes of education and learning. Consequently, demand arose for specialists in processing information and diagnosing and supporting people who could but also could not cope with the changes. This is how **career counselling** came to have its renaissance in Poland, but also faced the challenge of considerable changes.

The purpose of this article is to share some of my reflections regarding the current condition of Polish career counselling, to outline the changes it has gone through and answer the two following questions:

- ◆ What difficulties does Polish career counselling face while striving for coherence, co-operation and quality?
- ◆ What measures are being taken in order to eliminate these difficulties?

Changes in Polish career counselling over the last 20 years

Although the changes in Polish career counselling probably did not differ much from those that occurred in other European countries, they took place slightly later and – condensed in a short period – were more abrupt, radical and many-sided. They are concisely outlined in the table below.

Table 1. The long-term process of changes in Polish career counselling before and after 1989

Aspect of counselling	Period	
	Before 1989	After 1989
Main objective	Helping to choose a vocation as a one-time decision	Helping to reflectively (re)construct one's life-long career/biography seen as a mosaic of life
Location of counselling within structures	Bound up with institutional learning (school)	Related to lifelong learning (LLL) in the context of constant changes (Lifelong Career Guidance)
Method	Deciding for the individual	Accompanying the individual throughout his/her life, offering assistance at critical moments, supporting individual learning to (re)construct his/her biographies.
Groups of clients	Children and adolescents under 18	Children, adolescents and adults
Client's condition	Helpless individuals who cannot cope with their occupational problems.	Helpless individuals and resourceful ones with 'temporary' difficulties or doubts; relieving anxieties and uncertainty.
Sphere of client's life	Occupation/work	Not only the occupation/work but also other related spheres such as family, education, free time etc.
Employed specialist	Vocational adviser	Career/life/biography counsellor

Changes in counselling are a long and complex process. They began along with the socio-cultural and political changes and still continue, being in the process of 'becoming'.

Before 1989, the aim of Polish career counselling was to help young people to choose their school and vocation. In fact, vocational guidance finished at the age of 18, when clients of counselling services were still secondary school students.

Changes in the labour market which followed the transformation period have increased the demand for career counselling among other age groups. The difficulty of adapting to the changeable and unstable reality, the rapidly increasing influx of information on occupations, modes of education and the new labour market, as well as the threat of unemployment, substantially **extended the range of potential clients**. Counselling has become a life-long companion. Its name has also changed, and it is more and more frequently referred to as educational-vocational and/or career counselling (Wojtasik 2003a).

Now, educational-vocational guidance provides assistance not only to children and adolescents but also to adults. This is why those offering such assistance can no

longer be called 'vocational advisers'. A life, career or biography counsellor is by far a more adequate term (Wojtasik 2003a).

The shift in terminology is all the more motivated as before 1989 the choice of vocation used to be treated as a one-time, definitive decision, usually made on completing school and determining the individual's whole life. The onset of the market economy after 1989 compelled Poles to construct/reconstruct their careers (biographies) from a **lifelong perspective**.

The role of the counsellor in making vocational decisions is also changing. In the past advisers used to decide for their clients. Relying on the directive model, they tended to match an individual and a particular occupation and to straightforwardly point out which school and job s/he should choose in order to succeed. Apparently counsellors were driven by the fairly explicit needs of the non-capitalist economy.

The rapidly changing world we now inhabit is characterised by fluidity, the lack of transparency and the instability of social arrangements. New forms of risk and confidence are emerging. Globalisation, a massive social and cultural change, is progressing as a result of the dynamic development of new technologies, IT in particular (cf. Sztompka 2002).

Consequently, the role of the counsellor, who accompanies individuals throughout their life and supports them in learning and (re)constructing their biographies, has changed. Such advisers provide long-term assistance, which is convergent with the dialogic-liberal model. Their clients decide for themselves, assume responsibility for their decisions, and are offered assistance at critical moments and turning points of their lives.

Counsellors cannot be focused exclusively on their clients' choice of vocation because work is bound up with **the whole context of human existence**.

Career guidance has consequently moved out of the school, and now work-related questions are viewed from a lifelong learning perspective. Designing lifelong education is possible if it is based on lifelong career guidance. Such assistance is offered not only to the helpless who cannot effectively deal with their occupational problems; guidance is now conceived of in different terms, mostly as assistance offered to resourceful people at moments of temporary difficulties and doubts. Counselling is expected to relieve people's anxieties and uncertainties and to imbue them with a sense of coherence.

This, however, is a very challenging task. With the post-modern endorsement of pluralism, diversity of lifestyles and expanding individualism, individuals are usually left to their own resources. Isolated and self-centred, they are usually incapable of establishing social bonds from which to derive support and a sense of coherence.

Striving for coherence in career guidance: between a rigid system and a flexible network

In the former social order, career guidance was referred to as the system of ‘vocational orientation and advice’. It was a coherent system of functions and positions with its own specific hierarchy, which entailed coordinating operations of different interrelated institutions. The **system** was rigid, logical and hierarchical. The institutions that it included were dependent on each other.

Currently, a uniform system of counselling is non-existent. Today’s ambiguous and fluid reality is characterised by **flexible mosaic-like networks** connecting organisations, with an individual at the centre of such structures.

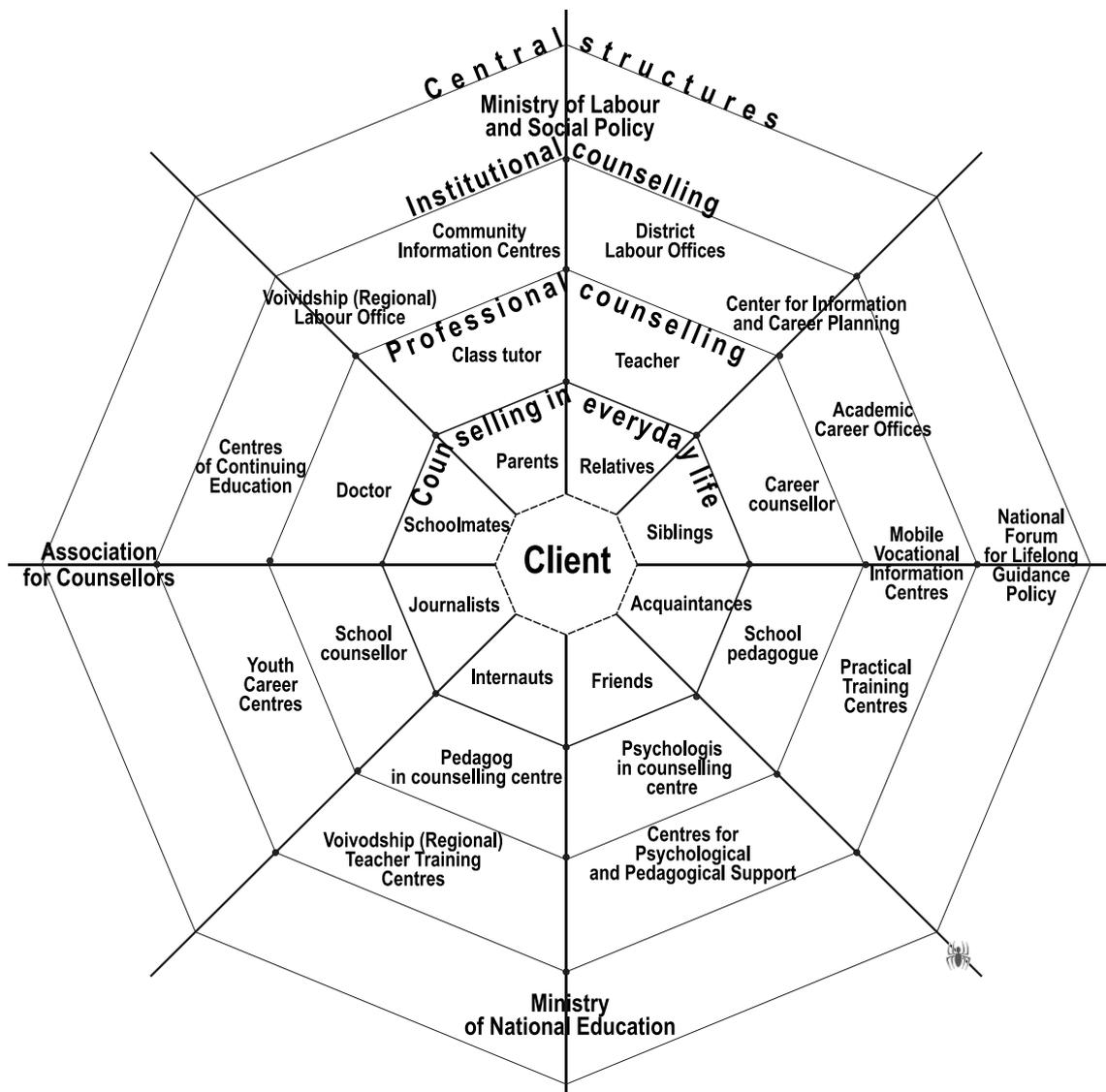


Figure 1. Career Counselling on the Web

In Bauman's view, **the network is a metaphor**, in which two activities – connecting and disconnecting – are performed repeatedly and incessantly. Each of us has this or that network within arm's reach. Most people have mobile phones with lists of phone numbers in them; and we all send and receive text messages. Bonds within this network are rather tenuous. We assume that some numbers will disappear from the list, and we may decide not to accept some calls or text messages. The meaning of the network changes from participant to participant. There are no identical networks. It is possible for people to participate in the same network but belong to different communities (Bauman 2008, p. 22), which, in turn, makes it difficult to sustain the coherence of society as a whole.

The notion of wholeness does not apply to post-modern society any more. Forfeiting a structure produced by traditional institutions, society is evolving from social communities to 'individual atoms'. Meta-narratives which used to determine society's principal objectives are disappearing. The character of authority is changing as well: authority no longer orders and supervises its subjects, but seduces them with the aid of the media (Szacki 2005, p. 917).

Coherence in counselling is difficult to achieve not only due to the dispersal of its context but also because of its **internal diversity**. Counselling is practiced not only by qualified advisers holding formal professional certificates but also by non-professional individuals. The role of advisers is played also by close family members, friends, other significant others as well as by strangers from the Internet chats, Internet blogs, etc. Although non-professional, non-institutional counselling is widespread and changes each human biography, it is rarely considered legitimate and does not receive serious scholarly attention.

A counselling interaction not always involves a direct face-to-face relationship, but it can also take place in other circumstances. Distant counselling is becoming increasingly frequent.

The diversity of counselling stems from the fact that it is often mediated by the Internet, phone, TV, radio and the press. Internet counselling in particular has quickly spread across the world, altering everyday life, blurring the line between the local and the global and opening up new prospects for communication and interaction.

In view of such considerable diversity in counselling, it is hard to talk about its **cohesion**. Harmonious fusion of all structures, objectives and aspects inherent in counselling is hardly possible. Nevertheless, I believe that even if complete coherence is not viable, we should endeavour to overcome some of the divergences and prevent such diversity that would distort the humanistic and ethical dimension of counselling. Such an aspiration could materialise in co-operation of various counselling agents.

Individualism and striving for co-operation in Polish counselling

Although the world we inhabit endorses individualism, individuals are burdened with responsibility for all the decisions they make and, consequently, for arranging their private and professional lives. On the other hand, they pine for positive interpersonal relations and firm social bonding.

In the fluid reality, an individual often feels lonely and isolated, spending a lot of time at the computer without developing any close relationships with others.

Fluid post-modernity makes the market favour first of all flexibility, creativity, easy adaptability to new modes of action and readiness to change both preferences and collaborators.

Individualism can be counterbalanced by co-operation as a kind of common action which contributes to accomplishing of the jointly designed goals. Cooperation involves mutual confidence, loyalty and dedication to the goal. As Michel Crozier states, to replace a hierarchical system, which immobilises everyone in their place, we have no other strategy but to develop co-operation. This is possible provided that cooperation does not become simply a fashionable idea which only serves to camouflage some old practices (e.g. co-operation can be imposed) (1996, p. 178).

Though proper relations in counselling mean co-operation involving partners focused on the client's problem, co-operation across wider counselling-related communities is even more significant.

Crozier claims that people can control themselves in order to co-operate, and that they can derive more satisfaction from cooperation than they do from competition. Mutual relations based on co-operation result in **synergy**. Everyone tries to open up to and for others, which fosters new ideas and creative enthusiasm. Everybody feels reborn and changed for the better. Crozier believes that one day we will build a society in which we will be able to co-operate better and better. Moreover, we are better prepared for such development than in the past because our consciousness and knowledge have expanded.

A social necessity, cooperation means also collaboration in a complex network of institutions, communities and organisations involved in career guidance. In Poland, the following central institutions deal with educational career counselling: the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Sport and Tourism and the Ministry of Economy. The activities of these institutions are coordinated by the Association of School and Career Counsellors of the Republic of Poland and the National Forum for Lifelong Guidance.

Counselling at the first level of the local administration is responsibility of regional labour offices as well as information and career planning centres. At the second level, counselling is carried out by job offices and career clubs .

The commune (the third level of the local administration) information centres, academic career offices, school career offices and mobile centres of vocational

information have been established in the framework of a governmental programme of school graduates' inclusion in the labour market.

The central level of career guidance in the Ministry of Education includes the General Education Department, Vocational and Continuing Education Department, the National Centre for Supporting Vocational and Continuing Education, and the Centre for Education Development. At the regional level, career guidance structures include regional branches of the National In-Service Teacher Training Centre, public institutions for training teachers as well as the second and the third level public and non-public institutions for training teachers.

The Practical Training Centres and the Centres of Continuing Education, responsible to the Ministry of Education, are also involved in career guidance.

Psychological-pedagogical counselling services are institutions very important for providing career guidance at the local level. The professionals they employ help young people to choose a type of education, find out about various jobs and plan their careers (Wojtasik 2005).

It is assumed, however, that educational-career counselling should be provided mostly **at schools**. It is at school that young people are being prepared throughout the years of education to plan their vocational development, choose the education paths and future occupations and enter the new labour market.

Educational-vocational counselling at school level belongs to responsibilities of the school pedagogues, teachers and class tutors. At some schools, School Job Centres have been established and career advisers have been appointed.

There are two very dynamic associations of counsellors in Poland. Various specialists are engaged in common projects and grants, in which partners can change depending on the type of project, time, required competence and tasks. New co-operation initiatives are being undertaken, such as the counselling seminar held at the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, with its 60 advisers ready to learn from each other, acquire knowledge, reflect on their work, share their experience and have it discussed publicly.

The quality of counselling is constantly growing due to activities undertaken at the governmental level and improved co-operation among organisations engaged in this important domain of our social life.

Career guidance as a service: between ubiquity and quality

Because the standards of evaluating social activities are unclear, striving after high quality in counselling is not an easy task. Developing an adequate scale, using it for accurate measurements and comparing numerous objects, states or phenomena, all this is much more difficult than comparing physical objects. Measuring psychological phenomena, which are individualised, changeable and sometimes hard to verbalise, is highly challenging. The quality of counselling is difficult to assess as the

quality of the facts studied in counselling is so difficult to determine. Hence evaluation of counselling as a form of assistance appears relatively rarely in the literature.

If **counselling is seen as a kind of service**, its quality can be measured by the number of advice-offering facilities, clients, consultations and instructions. And, indeed, such data are usually required by various decision makers as the most tangible index of counselling (Kargulowa, Wojtasik 2004).

However, it is much more difficult to assess the quality of the consultations and advice offered. What is appraised instead are counsellors: their knowledge, competence, personality and ability to show approval, to remain discreet and to give apt, i.e. acceptable and viable, advice.

A client's assessment of his/her visit as an important event in his/her life and implementing the received advice are significant indicators of the so-called 'durability of service'. The availability of service and the aesthetic aspect of the event (visit) are other components of quality assessment, which in this case, can depend on the location of the facility, its opening hours, number and types of the employed specialists, design and furnishing of the office and the extent to which it meets clients' expectations. Clients' opinions about the service quality are also important, and they usually include evaluation of the service directly after the visit, willingness to continue using the service, recommending it to others and recognition of their adviser's authority.

Although many different indexes can indicate the service quality, not all of them are easy to interpret. Improving the standards of counselling requires research on the current condition of counselling practices, which, however, is rather complicated. Attempts to measure counselling accurately with scientific tools are doomed to failure, because such measurement could cover only some of the dimensions enumerated above. Many of these indexes cannot be quantitatively assessed. And it seems hardly feasible to develop tools which could render accurate, comprehensive measurement of such a complex social process, activity and service as counselling. The quality can be upgraded by improving the organisational culture of the institutions involved. The decision to raise the quality entails some predictable expenses, such as costs of new equipment or advisers' training. New technology, better materials and advanced methods of organisation are also important. These are, however, the quantitative dimensions of counselling. The quality as indicated by essential changes in clients' lives is much more difficult to assess (Kargulowa, Wojtasik 2004).

Still, the organisers of social life enquire first of all about the economic outcomes of counselling and its cost-effectiveness, calculating the returns that the expenditures on maintenance of services, counsellors' salaries and development of their tools can render.

Is counselling profitable, and is it possible to improve its economic quality? It is a difficult question. In economic terms, it is not easy to calculate the amount of money the state spends on a helpless individual, with the difficulty growing if not an individual but a whole population of helpless people is in question. The analogy

with the health care system implies, however, that prevention is cheaper than treatment. Therefore, preventing helplessness, offering assistance to solve ongoing problems, teaching people to cope with difficult situations would obviously seem cheaper than providing care for them (Kargulowa, Wojtasik 2004).

Another dilemma the contemporary world faces is whether to choose the **individual quality of life or its mass character**. On the one hand, we would wish to see the desirable goods commonly available; on the other hand, we realise that their quality should be protected. It is true also about counselling: mass counselling will not be able to sustain high quality. However, more and more people feel lost in the unpredictable world. They are forced to make many choices, and counselling is increasingly sought for.

The mass character of counselling is not conducive to its high quality. It suffices to glance at the Internet for advisory activities to see that apart from professional, highly specialised advice, tips and instructions are given by self-appointed, yet unqualified and even thoroughly inadequate advisors. We are unable to control this type of counselling, which is sometimes considered useful by people posting their messages on the Internet forums. Some non-professional activities on the Internet, such as numerous support groups, are undoubtedly valuable. Unquestionably, in the advisory domain what the Internet offers can be really helpful; at the same time, however, it may also convey dangerous guidelines and instructions. The diversity and mass character of counselling are bound up with a decrease in its quality. Not all advisers are sufficiently qualified to know how to contact other people, how to help without disturbing and how to support others in making their own decisions.

The attempts to overcome contradictions and improve the quality of Polish counselling

As Jean-Paul Fitoussi and Pierre Rosanvallon claim, different social ills stem from social fuzziness, which in turn, makes it difficult to understand transformation. To positively face the future, it is necessary to better understand the world around us (2000, pp. 184-185). Social developments of the late modernity do not have to result in the domination of individualism, globalisation, excessive consumption and information surplus. P. Sztompka maintains that such one-sided view of life could be changed by **social reflectiveness**.

According to Anthony Giddens, reflectiveness is the capability of thinking critically (about oneself), perceiving threats and taking precautionary measures. It consists simultaneously of thought and impression (2001, p. 21). An individual's capability to reflect is the capability to understand his/her action. Reflectiveness should not be understood exclusively as self-knowledge. It is also a means of controlling the incessant stream of social life as it entails continuous monitoring of one's own action as well as the action expected from others (Giddens 2001, p. 41).

Only conscious reflection on the state of the world and the direction it is heading for can help restore the balance among the various poles of human fate (Sztompka 2003). The initial purely intellectual consideration motivates one to proceed to preventive actions. This is how a turn towards other (repressed) poles of social life can occur and materialise in co-operation, creating communities, defence of local cultures, self-actualisation, preservation of high and permanent values, enhancement of the quality of life, counteracting the fetishising of information, as well as in a search for wisdom, production of meanings and formulation of general ideas.

Thus, becoming aware of contradictions, naming them and reflecting on them can make us apply some preventive measures, which, however, will not protect us against new dilemmas and contradictions.

Striving for **coherence and co-operation** means counterbalancing extreme individualism. As Andrzej Szahaj states, craving for communality is universal and *it is felt particularly strongly in the situation of a permanent mutual fight instigated by the so-called late capitalism, which made its principal rule of competition inviolable* (2007, p. 95).

Educating advisors also contributes to the improvement of counselling quality. In Poland, career advisers receive training in undergraduate and graduate programmes. Psychologists, pedagogues and sociologists become counsellors.

Improvement in the counsellor's work is most often associated with obtaining a degree followed by postgraduate training (e.g. Advisor – Trainer – Consultant. Lifelong Professional Advice) and various courses. Counsellors can develop their competence through self-education, studying professional literature, and participating in conferences, discussions and seminars. Also, counsellors can share their experience and participate in supervisory activities. Unfortunately, they rarely question the knowledge they acquire or analyse critically their own advisory practice (Wojtasik 2003b).

And the counselling practice could be improved if counsellors became reflective researchers in action, critically reflecting on their activities and implicit knowledge and developing their own informal theories at the intersection of popular knowledge and scientific theory (cf. Wojtasik 2000).

Counsellors can prepare for work by studying the advisory process itself. However, it must be remembered that this process is a complex chain of events and does not always proceed in stages described in the literature. Each contact with another person is more or less indeterminate and unpredictable. The closer and more direct such encounter is, the more indeterminate it becomes. Counsellors who only expect to be provided with ready-made recipes and solutions must feel disappointed because fixed formulas do not match the ever-changing reality.

Ultimate solutions are difficult to find in the world of rapid changes. Nevertheless, advisors can better understand themselves and interpret their own activity if they practice critical self-reflection, deliberate on their work and formulate informal, personal theories.

Reflective advisors, thus, can monitor their own work, assess it and try to comprehend themselves and others, which may consequently improve the advisory process.

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