Needs and Needs Assessment in Career Guidance and Counselling: Lack of Scientific Exploration and Justification?

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Abstract

Almost all modern societies agree that career guidance and counselling should be offered based on the needs of those who apply for the service. Thus, proper and timely application of needs assessment becomes an indispensable part of developing as well as evaluating career guidance and counselling interventions, programs or policies. However, it is argued that there is a lack of scientific exploration and justification towards understanding of needs and how they should be assessed. This leads to misinterpretation and an ambiguous understanding of needs in career guidance and counselling. This paper provides an overview of the conceptualisation of needs as well as needs assessment from neighbouring disciplines. A particular focus is on the incorporation of needs assessment in the area of career guidance and counselling.

Keywords: needs, needs assessment, career guidance

Introduction

Need is the most frequently used normative concept associated with development and human wellbeing. Wiggins (1987, p. 4) states that "…the political administrative process as we know it in Europe and North America could scarcely continue (could scarcely even conclude an argument) without constant recourse to the idea of need." Similarly, McLeod (2011) noted that the concept of need has a central role to play in policy-making.

Following the statement above, "need" is increasingly seen as the key normative term serving as an anchor for various policy-initiated career guidance projects, programmes or single career guidance and counselling interventions. Scientific research, policy as well as career counsellors in their practice are aiming at providing career guidance services which meet the needs of the applicants or at least are oriented to applicants' needs. Countries have initiated legal acts and guidelines which included the term "need" as the key normative reference point for policy definitions of lifelong career guidance services. For instance The Department of Education in the UK specified that "the overall objective of an effective careers education and guidance programme is to enable learners to manage their own career

development successfully, confidently and with due respect and care for their own *needs*, those of others and of their wider communities" (Department of Education [DE] Entitlement Framework Circular, 2005). In India, the Jiva project "has been designed to address the livelihood planning needs of Indian young people through relevant and culturally grounded career counselling services" (Arulmani, 2010). In Germany, the National Forum for Guidance in Education, Career and Employment agreed that the general aim of the National Forum is to promote the professional delivery of guidance in education, vocational training and employment sectors in Germany, to give stimulation for the (further) development of guidance services which meet the different users' needs (NFB, 2006). Similarly in another EU country, Lithuania, among seven quality assurance indicators of career guidance, one criteria of "Expedience" specifically addresses the importance of service based on needs: "Expedience—the services correspond to individual needs of inhabitants and society" (Baltriene & Augutiene, 2006). Internationally, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDFOP) emphasized that career guidance services "should be widely accessible on a lifelong basis, to serve the needs of individuals, the economy and wider society" (CEDEFOP, 2009, p. 13).

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Apart from countries and institutions, career counsellors are focused on obtaining the resources for intake needs assessment in order to better understand their applicants and their performance deficiencies.

The persistent dominance of the term "need" as a normative term in the scientific and policy discourse as well as in the practice of career guidance and counselling, raises the importance of proper and timely application of needs measurement or needs assessment. This can be seen as an indispensable part of developing as well as evaluating career guidance interventions, programs or policies. However, it is believed that there is a lack of scientific justification towards understanding of "need" and how it should be assessed in the field of career guidance and counselling.

Background

This paper draws on selected work in the area of career guidance which focused on needs and needs assessment of career guidance participants. As often demonstrated by the research, "need" can be widely interpreted by the career guidance researchers, as "attitude", "perceived solution to a problem", "belief" or "wish". Often, the ones whose needs are being measured are asked by the researchers to identify their own deficiencies and thus to describe their "needs" in the form of beliefs of what is good or what is desired. The career guidance research by Gonzalez in Spain on the career education needs of secondary school students employed a "needs assessment instrument" which aimed at "assessing youth attitudes and beliefs about work as well as their career plans" (Gonzales, 1997, p. 215). In Canada, Witko, Bernes, Magnusson, and Bardick (2005) explored the career guidance needs of high school students using the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey by Magnusson and Bernes (2001). Throughout the study, the borderline between needs and wants is blurred. Indeed, one article from this study was titled "Senior high school career planning: What students want". The authors specifically emphasized the importance of assessing needs by "hearing directly from the students, rather than inferring what it is that they need" (Witko et al., 2005, p. 37). However, the notion that perceived or felt needs are an appropriate and useful mechanism for managing needs is doubted by various philosophers and researchers. Particularly, McLeod (2011) argues against the view that one can know one's own needs (as

one can know some kinds of desires) by feeling them.

Among the researchers who sought more objective indicators which could signify the need for career guidance and counselling services were Fouad et al. (2006). In their study titled "need, awareness, and use of career services for college students", the researchers distinguish between measuring need, and measuring the levels of awareness and the use of career guidance services. They provide a diagnostic type of testing format, aiming to determine the gaps or needs by measuring the study participants' levels of psychological distress, and of psychological well-being. The researchers concluded that the study demonstrated that students "have career decision difficulties and psychological distress, *indicating a need* for career counselling and career services" (Fouad et al., 2006, p. 416, emphasis is mine). The assumption that the needs can be detected mainly by third persons, by the symptoms observed or reported is expressed by McLeod (2011). Based on that argument, if, for instance, one knows the level of psychological distress in healthy people under normal or relaxed circumstances, then higher levels of psychological distress, particularly if correlated with lack of career information or ability to engage in meaningful conversations on the pertinent issues with trusted people, can be described as needs requiring career guidance and counselling. On the other hand, a moderately higher level of distress may also serve as an opportunity to concentrate and actively generate high stake decisions about a person's life and career goals or future career directions. In general, it may be noted that as a result of the lack of exploration of the concept of "need", career guidance and counselling research has often resulted in respondents giving answers about their wants, levels of satisfaction, beliefs, hopes or preferences. Such an approach provides little or no scientific knowledge about the nature and scope of needs in the career guidance field. It also prevents successful planning of career guidance interventions where the interventions are intended to be based on more objective outcomes rather than wants and desires.

The scientific studies on "needs" actually list a number of so called satisfiers (Mallmann, 1980). For instance, "education may be regarded as a satisfier of the need for understanding" (Jackson, Jager, & Stagl, 2004). In career guidance needs research, the

satisfiers which are often labelled as "needs" are information and advice, professional guidance and a comprehensive career curriculum (Witko et al., 2005). Other "needs" inputs and satisfiers include additional help with finding jobs and careers, understanding the guidance programme, developing self-understanding, career awareness, exploration and planning, interpersonal relationships, value clarification, selection of courses and acquisition of decision-making skills (Chuenyane, 1983). Compared to inputs or satisfiers in the career guidance field, much less is known about gaps in outcomes, for instance, decreased levels of psychological distress, improved school or work performance, higher family-work balance. Real needs and the relationship between needs as objective deficiencies and the means offered to satisfy them remain uninvestigated.

The Challenge of Defining and Assessing Needs: Need versus Desire and Dissatisfaction

Although the assessment of "felt needs" in the form of beliefs about what is good or desired by the person carries a positive notion of inclusiveness and democratic participation, it does not solve the problem of "adaptive preferences"; Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen argues that subjective perceptions of utility "can be moulded by social conditioning and a resigned acceptance of misfortune" (Sen, 1991, p. 133). This kind of acceptance and even choice to remain in an unfavourable environment should be considered beforehand. Particularly, in the presence of the claim that people "should be the experts of their own condition" (Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler, & Westmorland, 2007, p. 61) one should still be knowledgeable about the "comfort of misery" before asking vulnerable groups about their felt deficiencies.

Moreover, it is further argued that even dissatisfaction which is often assumed to be a sign of need, does not necessarily indicate an objective lack or deficiency. According to Nussbaum (2007) "people may also become accustomed to having more than others, and they may protest if those unequal privileges are curtailed; but their great dissatisfaction does not dispose of the question of equal justice" (p.14). Thus, it is evident that there is a wide room for interpretation of the term "need" as well as methodological problems regarding the application of needs assessments. It is clear that there is no common understanding related to these

normative terms and scholars such as McLeod (2011) have called for "a more promising epistemology of need than has so far been contained in the literature". This problem signals that there should be a broader scientific exploration and justification towards understanding of "need" in the area of career guidance and counselling. A review of how need is conceptualized and analysed in other disciplines could provide useful insights.

The Concept of "Need" in Neighbouring Disciplines

Although largely taken for granted by career guidance and counselling research and policy analysis, the concept of "need" is explicitly analysed in different areas of social, economic and medical research and philosophy studies. However, even in such areas as social policy research which analyses the social word with its language and thinking, it is admitted that despite its centrality "the concept of needs was largely taken for granted in social policy analysis until the 1980s" (Lister, 2010, p. 167). Moreover, even nowadays the politics of needs interpretation is still observed, and whose expertise decides what is counted as a need, is a contested area (Lister, 2010). It remains a challenging problem for needs research to define a need. Clarke and Langan (1998, p. 260) further state "though the condition of being in need may be regarded as self-evident, the question of how the needs of different individuals, or groups of individuals, are met in our society is not so straightforward. It is immediately apparent that there is considerable scope for conflict over the ways in which society defines and meets the needs of particular individuals or sections of society."

Addressing the lack of scientific exploration of the concept of "needs" and what it means to be 'in need' Dean (2010), Doyal and Gough (1991), Lister (2010), and Watkins, West-Meiers and Visser (2012), for example, explicitly analyse the concept of needs and needs assessment. The majority of these authors distinguished between needs and wants and provided a classification of needs: thin and thick (Dean, 2010); basic and intermediate (Doyal & Gough, 1991); individual, organisational and societal needs (Watkins et al., 2012).

Despite the explicit analysis and dedication towards making the concept of need more transparent, some of the works mentioned above add even more confusion to the issue of needs conceptualisation and

interpretation. For instance, Lister (2010) by providing highly valuable real-life examples on the interrelationship of societal and individual needs somehow adds more perplexity towards interpreting needs. Lister (2010) provides an example of a societal problem related to several cases of homicide committed by the mentally ill. The situation evoked governmental reaction to enforce supervised chemical treatment on people with mental illness. The mental health charities expressed the contradictory belief that such action will lead to a greater reliance on chemical treatment as the easy option, whereas stopping the medication can lead to improved quality of life among the mentally ill. According to Lister (2010), this particular example, illustrates the clash of needs of individuals with mental health problems as interpreted by the government versus mental health campaigners. However, more than the clash of different interpretations of need, notice the different perceived solutions or *satisfiers* in this example. Following such alternative logic, there is only one need—the need to stop homicide. It is highly unlikely that mental health activists will be opposed to recognizing this need. Therefore, the clash exists only in terms of different solutions offered by the government and the activists. In this particular case, the activists seem to be addressing the need in a more systemic and strategic way than the government.

Similar misinterpretations of what is need and how it can be assessed are present in other similar ontologies and conceptualisations of human need, without even considering a bigger number of empirical studies on "needs" where the concept of needs is addressed only implicitly if presented at all. Nevertheless, there are some additional resources for those career guidance and counselling researchers and practitioners who would like to apply needs assessment in their work.

Needs and Needs Assessment: The Alternative Model

Roger Kaufman places significant attention on the conceptual analysis of the term "need" by noting that the correct understanding of the word "need" is "critical in creation of a better world" (Kaufman, Oakley-Browne, Watkins, & Leigh, 2003, p. 113). "How 'need' is defined is pivotal in determining how objectives are selected" (Watkins & Kaufman, 1996, p. 11). Kaufman was the first to urge always using "need" as a noun and

never as a verb (Kaufman, 1997; Kaufman, 2006; Kaufman, Rojas, & Mayer, 1993) for "to use 'need' as a verb, is to see it as a means" (Kaufman & Grise, 1995, p. 12). Using needs as a verb means "to jump from unwarranted assumptions to foregone conclusions" (Kaufman et al., 2003, p. 116).

In a recent book published by the World Bank titled "A guide to assessing needs: Essential tools for collecting information, making decisions, and achieving development results" Watkins et al. (2012) define need as gap in results. Needs are seen as the differences between current achievements and desired accomplishments (see Figure 1).

Real, objective needs are described through discrepancies of present and desired accomplishments. Assuming that "what should be" is the desired result and "what is" is the data which indicates the current status of the results, the definition of need is the gap that emerges between 'what should be' and 'what is' (Kaufman et al., 2003). Thus, needs are directly related to the objectives we have. According to Kaufman, if need is a gap in results, than there are three type of needs— one each for gaps in outcomes (gaps in societal needs), outputs (gaps in organisational results) and products (gaps in individual results). In this framework, non-results, that is gaps in process or inputs, are referred to as quasi-needs (Kaufman,1990). Most complex problems (Kaufman et al., 2003) require identification of needs at multiple levels. For instance low school performance of one student may indicate the need on the individual level (e.g., unhappy love relationship—need for reciprocation in romantic relationships), organizational level (e.g., frequent change of teaching staff—need for a low turnover of teaching staff) or even societal level (e.g., economic or/and ecological crisis—need for economic stability). In many cases, the needs occur on many levels simultaneously. Thus, by applying needs assessments one could systemically address needs at multiple levels in order to view the whole complexity of the problem, rather than attempt to reduce the complexity by focusing on the immediate parts of the problem.

Needs assessments are proactive, before-the-fact identification of the gaps between current results and the desired ones. It is a series of results-based comparisons between what is and what should be or could be. In general, it can be stated that needs

Figure 1. Needs as Gaps in Results.
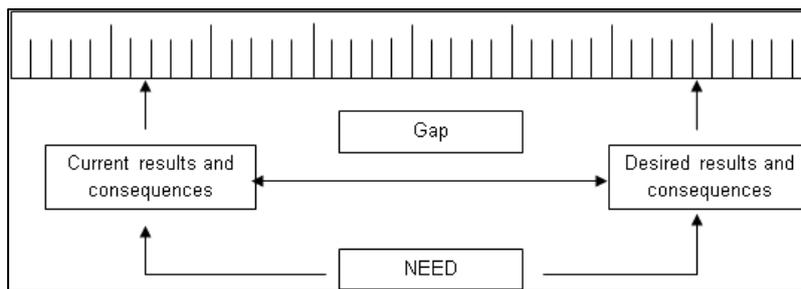
Adapted with permission from R. Kaufman, A. M. Rojas, and H. Mayer (1993, p. 4).

assessments are important to improving the quality of decisions: "In all cases, needs assessment offers a careful process for assessing gaps between current results and desired results (that is, needs) and then for applying that information to identify the available options so that decisions can be made" (Watkins et al., 2012, p. 3). In relation to evaluation, needs assessments serve a different function, for they are used to answer questions such as 'what would be necessary to deliver?' rather than, 'did we deliver what we set out to deliver?' (Kaufman, 1990).

The attempt to objectively measure needs might be criticised in terms that it does not allow any subjective participation of individuals. However, as stated earlier, people very often have unequal capabilities in recognizing and objectively assessing their own needs. A similar example is given by Endacott (1997): "the nurse on night duty who is feeling sleepy at 4 a.m. will probably need to sleep but may as well state 'I need a cup of coffee' as she feels that the coffee may help her to remain awake for the remainder of the shift". Endacott goes on to cite Attwood and Ellis who say, "real needs can be defined as those which are objective deficiencies that actually exist and may or may not be recognized by the one who has the need" (as cited in Endacott, 1996, p. 474). Similarly, a person who spent all his life in the poor district of an impoverished country will not necessarily express a need for a career. He or she is also not likely to identify the potential satisfiers: career guidance and counselling services which may lead to the successful career.

Needs and Needs Assessment in the Area of Career Guidance: The Challenges

It can be assumed that needs assessment in the area of career guidance and counselling remains a challenge for scientists, policymakers and practitioners. This is particularly so because lifelong career

guidance and counselling are conceptualised as complex interventions within open systems, with needs not only belonging to individuals, but also to organisations and societies (IAEVG, 2009; OECD, 2004; Watts, 1999). Even school-based career guidance, which was earlier focused primarily on the young person's wishes and desires, is now seen as the action field of numerous stakeholders: businesses, schools, employment agencies, parents, universities and colleges, and community initiatives. All these stakeholders declare their own needs in the area of school-based career guidance in pursuing their own developmental goals.

Kaufman et al. (2003) define complex intervention as large scale intervention or "…a method for involving the whole system, internal and external clients in the strategic thinking and change process" (p. 95). Career guidance and counselling is more often addressed from the open system perspective and viewed as a complex intervention. Such concepts as "stakeholders" and their "needs" become central terms in the scientific discourse as well as the dominating theme in policy documents. Therefore, what has been previously proclaimed in silence—that the purpose of career guidance and counselling is to ensure that not only individual needs but also the needs of the whole society must be met—now is declared more and more openly. Such a tendency is observed in the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2010) report: "Over the last decade increasing attention has been given to guidance at European and national levels. It is recognised as a crucial dimension of lifelong learning, promoting both social and economic goals: in particular, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of education, training and the labour market through its contribution to reducing drop-out, preventing skill mismatches and boosting productivity" (ELGPN, 2010, p. 7).

Hence, career guidance and counselling in the broadest sense are now perceived as a system and means to provide not only for individual but also organisational and societal development. Such a shift in career guidance perceptions and conceptualisation moves away from "single provider-client" type of services, towards viewing career guidance as a complex system of stakeholders (e.g. families, businesses, schools, community members, NGOs, state institutions etc.). Assessing needs at mega (society), macro (organisations/institutions) and micro (individual) levels is assumed to be required. This, in turn, creates demands among practitioners for certain competencies in the area of need recognition and assessment.

Discussion and Conclusion

The question of what are the needs of individuals, families, other organisations and societies which can be potentially satisfied by career guidance and counselling, seems to be a pertinent one. However, it is also important to emphasise that "what the clients may want in guidance is in fact not what they need" (Plant, 2011). It seems that only by appropriate and timely identification of needs, adequate, sustainable and cost-effective career guidance solutions can be offered. Thus, needs assessment is viewed as the first and inevitable step in planning of career guidance and counselling interventions.

However, it can be assumed that needs assessment in the area of career guidance and counselling remains a challenge for researchers, policy makers and practitioners. Moreover, needs are not clearly defined also in other social disciplines. The approach to needs interpretation and assessment by Kaufman (e.g., Kaufman, 1997, 2006) seems to be a useful framework, from which career guidance and counselling could borrow epistemological and methodological ideas. This includes a systems view in which there is a multi-level needs assessment. It is our proposal that the overall aim should be to provide deeper and wider exploration of needs and needs assessment in the area of career guidance and counselling by applying different theoretical and empirical resources. Subsequently, after reaching this aim, appropriate training for practitioners could be introduced.

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