

**"The specificity of career guidance in Arab states:
some considerations."**

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Introduction

Career guidance is a particularly ‘western’ practice that is linked to advanced industrialisation and the increasing division of labour that that brings about (Watts & Fretwell, 2004). As a social practice, it is also closely associated with forms of being that are prevalent in capitalist economies, where notions of the ‘self’, of the individual, and of the determination of one’s occupational futures on the basis of ‘ability’ and ‘merit’ are deeply engrained as the dominant world views.

What I will set out to do in this presentation is to reflect on the meaning and relevance of career guidance in the Arab ‘world’: this is not to say, by any means, that there is a stark division or contrast between the ‘western’ and the ‘Arab’ world. Far from it. As my colleague André E. Mazawi and I have taken pains to point out in our recent volume on *Education in the Arab ‘World’: Political Projects, Struggles and Geometries of Power* (Mazawi & Sultana, 2010) cultures and worldviews are hybrid rather than monolithic entities, difficult to disentangle, so that currents of thought and practice influence vast swathes of land, irrespective of national borders or geopolitical ideologies.

My reflections on career guidance in the Arab world/s have been provoked and nourished by a number of experiences over the past several years. The study that Tony Watts and I carried out on behalf of the European Training Foundation (Sultana & Watts, 2007), where we drew up a comparative synthesis of career guidance practices in 10 Mediterranean countries—8 of which are Arab states or territories—has been particularly formative for me. So too has my recent work in Palestine (Sultana, 2008) and Egypt (Badawi, Sultana & Zelloth, 2008) where I was involved in the mapping of career guidance services, and the articulation of a policy agenda for career guidance in both the education and labour market sectors. My understanding of the Arab world has also been increased through research that I have carried out on behalf of UNICEF, which enabled me to look at educational innovation in such places as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria.¹

Despite all these formative and intensely enriching experiences, what I will present to you cannot but be what it is: namely, the reflections of a person who, while often a guest in the Arab region, ultimately cannot

¹ Publications related to this series of research studies in Arab states, as well as several of the reports on career guidance by the present author, can be downloaded from <http://www.um.edu.mt/emcer/aboutdirector/publications>

but have an ‘outsider’s’ view of it. As such, I ask you to bear with me if I get things wrong or not quite right, and to correct me with openness and frankness in our effort to arrive to a shared understanding of this important subject.

In what follows, my main argument will be that that the region is characterised by a number of economic, political, socio-cultural and educational factors which have constrained the development of career guidance services, and have influenced the forms which existing services have taken. These factors need to be seriously considered in any future development of career guidance, to ensure that they are embedded in their context and not merely imported from elsewhere. The contention is that only if we take care to ‘re-territorialize’ (Sultana, 2009) the notion of career guidance in the specificity of the Arab context/s can a practice be developed that is attractive to both individuals and their family on the one hand, and policy makers on the other.

Contextual specificities of the MEDA region

Economic and political factors

One important economic factor that plays an important part in determining the viability of career guidance in the Arab world is *rural poverty*. The economies of several countries in the MEDA region – such as Morocco, Syria and Turkey – are marked by a heavy reliance on agriculture, with sizeable percentages of the population living in rural regions. This raises important questions regarding the value of career guidance to poor, rural communities, where access to education is still limited, where the range of occupations available to choose from may be effectively restricted to agriculture and related jobs, transmitted largely through families, and where work is focused on economic survival rather than self-development and identity construction.

A second, linked factor is the extent of the *informal sector*. This is commonly defined to cover unregistered or unincorporated enterprises below a certain size (usually 5 employees or less), including individuals who may employ family members or others on an occasional basis; it covers occupations in traditional arts and crafts, auto-mechanical repairs, and street vending, but excludes agricultural activities (Bardak, Huitfeldt & Wahba, 2006). ILO estimates suggest that informal-sector employment as a percentage of non-agricultural employment accounts for 35% to 50% in most MEDA countries (Bardak, 2005). The sector is not highly regulated or formalised, with few if any job descriptions, qualification requirements, or occupational structures. Many of the jobs are low-skilled or even unskilled, with proficiency being acquired on the job, through informal apprenticeship with more experienced workers, or by trial-and-error. Such work tends not to feature in formal career information resources

or career education programmes, even though for many students it represents their most realistic and likely future.

Third, even within the formal economy most of the formal activity outside the public sector is carried out in *small and medium-sized enterprises* (SMEs). A lot of these are family-owned micro-enterprises, employing less than 10 workers, most of whom may be members of the family. Young family members are commonly expected to commit themselves to the family business. The scope of career guidance in such situations is restricted, since the notion of “choice” is effectively circumscribed and foreclosed by family needs and expectations.

Fourth, because most of the Arab countries in the MEDA region have little if any unemployment protection, *employment in the public sector* – both in administration and in state-owned enterprises – is very attractive because of the job security and social protection it offers. The share of public-sector employment ranges from more than 30% in Tunisia and Egypt, 50% in Jordan, to close to 60% in Algeria. The share of “civilian government employment” worldwide is on average 11% of total employment, but in the MEDA region as a whole it goes up to 17.5% (Bardak, 2005). Many workers in the public sector also supplement their incomes with moonlighting in the informal sector: this second employment may provide more occupational satisfaction than their formal job. Such complexities may be difficult to address within formal career guidance systems.

Fifth, only Algeria among the Arab states has unemployment insurance for eligible citizens who end up without a job. Accordingly, the unemployed in the other countries have *little if any incentive to go to the Public Employment Services* (PES) except where, as in Morocco, the mediation with the labour market has been strengthened through the introduction of a range of services that support client access to the labour market. In many instances across the region, however, this is still not the case. In Egypt, for example, public employment services perform primarily a rubber-stamping function once people have obtained a job, for tax-registration purposes. In such situations, career guidance services are unlikely to be given much priority in the PES.

Sixth, a strong feature of the region has been the *exporting of labour to neighbouring countries* (especially the Gulf States), as well as to Europe and North America. This is partly related to the high birth rate: the region has the largest proportion of young people in the world, with more than half of the population under the age of 25, and almost 38% under the age of 14 (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2002). The flow of migrant labour has mitigated the problem of unemployment, and is a significant source of national income (Ozden & Schiff, 2005). It nevertheless represents a haemorrhage that further exacerbates the weak economic position of the south (Sabour, 1993). It

raises the issues of the extent to which career guidance services should give attention to study and work opportunities abroad.

Finally, *political factors* can limit the range of opportunities. In Palestine, the West Bank is under military occupation and the Gaza Strip is closed and under siege, which makes any kind of mobility very difficult. Lebanon, for its part, has closed off opportunities for employment to Palestinians in sixty occupations (International Federation for Human Rights, 2003). Such restrictions in geographical and occupational mobility naturally have dramatic implications for any notion of choice, and can limit the scope and even the relevance of career guidance. Political turbulence can also affect the scope for career guidance services in other ways. In Lebanon, for example, the civil war, political instability and the recent war with Israel have all caused economic stagnation and halted development activities.

Socio-cultural factors

Alongside these economic and political factors are a number of socio-cultural factors.

One is the *importance of family influences*. The family is often an extended one, more akin to the notion of clan, around which several aspects of social relations come together. Clans demarcate and regulate several boundaries, including potential partners for marriage and for business alliances. They are also the main form of economic and social support: the cohesive system of social responsibility under which members of families support one another in hard times is one of the reasons why absolute poverty is the lowest among all the developing regions of the world (Bardak, 2005). The converse of this is that families often have a very significant influence on what occupations are pursued by members of that family or clan. Indeed, the Western notion of individual career guidance might be seen as inappropriate and/or irrelevant by some groups, since traditional notions of respect towards elders often induce young people to follow pathways decided for them by parents, older siblings, close relatives, and leaders in the clan. The latter may very well be the key social institution defining identity.

In relation to this, Hofstede's (2001) work on national and regional cultural groupings which seem to be remarkably persistent over time, and which affect behaviour of both individuals and organisations, is particularly relevant. Hofstede draws a distinction between those cultures that have an individualist orientation and those that are, in contrast, *collectivist*. Most Mediterranean and Arab societies reflect the latter orientation, with people being expected to act not autonomously but rather as members of a group or organisation. The implications of collectivist world-views on orientations to career guidance, and the impact of an interdependent view of the self, have been explored by

Flum & Cinamon (2006) among others. Such views might very well clash with one of the major underlying assumptions about guidance in western societies, where this ultimately social practice can best be seen in terms of the notion of “care of the self”, with guidance being one of the “technologies of self” through which individuals constitute themselves as subjects (Foucault, 1986).

Second, *traditional gender roles* are very important, and often legitimised not just by tradition but also by particular (sometimes contested) interpretations of religious dogma. Occupations are highly gender-typified, and it is often considered unseemly and even shameful for a person to transgress gender roles when exploring career futures, or for women to work in a predominantly male environment. The dilemma for career guidance here is that, given the importance of the patriarchal family (Nasser & Abouchédid, 2006), practitioners have to involve parents in the process of choice; but in doing so they may have to combat the prejudices that parents bring with them and which limit aspirations, particularly for girls - whose futures tend to be narrowly tied to the roles of wife, mother, and carer of elderly relatives, including in-laws. Both allegiance to the clan and attitudes towards gendered identities are closely linked to the notion of honour and shame: core values in Mediterranean societies that serve to pressure individuals into submitting to the expectations and norms of the community (Peristiany, 1965).

Third, the role of the family in Arab societies includes the exercise of *influence, patronage and clientalism* - features that are typical of Mediterranean societies (see e.g. Boissevain, 1974). The standing of a particular family or clan in a community determines its *wasta* (influence), and can play a major part in providing access to opportunities for employment, particularly in the public sector. Informal networks of influence take precedence over impersonal and formalised recruitment procedures (Nasser & Abouchédid, 2006), to the detriment of developing a meritocratic society. This can severely restrict the scope for career guidance. Many young people do not show much interest in enhancing their ability to choose because they believe that their career chances depend entirely upon their family connections.

Such orientations are fed by other related dimensions of culture. The research by Hofstede (2001) suggests that Arab societies, like Latin American ones, score highest when it comes to what is referred to as “*power distance*”, i.e. the degree to which the less powerful members of society expect there to be differences in the levels of power. In most contexts in the region, the overwhelming expectation is that some individuals wield larger amounts of power than do others. Needless to say, such expectations feed into several aspects of the career decision-making process - including, for instance, acceptance of one’s position in the social structure, views on what constitutes appropriate

aspirations, as well as on the channels and strategies that facilitate social mobility.

Fourth, directiveness is strongly embedded in the culture of many Arab countries. This is evident not only within the family, but also within the school system, where the curricula are often perceived to encourage submission, obedience, subordination and compliance, rather than free critical thinking (Bardak, 2005). The state too has, in many parts of the region, tended to adopt an approach to the economy that is both centralist and command-driven. Several of the countries in the region have developed a succession of medium-term plans for their economies, projecting the labour requirements to implement these plans, and exerting strong policy influence to direct young people into these tracks. This can pre-empt notions of choice as this is normally understood in career guidance. In such circumstances, it is likely that the concept of choice and the scope for formal career guidance services will be restricted, as also will be the expectations of, and the styles and methods adopted by, such formal career guidance services as may exist.

Fifth, linked to family socialisation and its impact on career orientations is a *deeply embedded life orientation* that has been identified in many Mediterranean societies, based on *fatalism*. An important distinction made in attribution theory refers to the difference between individuals and communities in attributing success or failure in life, as well as achievement more generally, to external or internal factors. People from the Mediterranean as well as Arab states tend to exhibit a high degree of external attribution, i.e. they tend to attribute success and failure to such external factors as luck, God, destiny, and so on (Cohn-Mor, 2001). It could also be said that Islam – which means “submission to God’s will” – reinforces and gives a religious dimension to notions of quasi-fatalistic acceptance of personal destinies defined by others. Such beliefs are important, particularly in cultures where religion is not just a private matter, but a phenomenon that strongly shapes the daily public life of individuals and groups. These deeply embedded life orientations have important implications for career guidance, inasmuch as the latter is predicated on the notion that individuals are largely in control of their own destinies, and that the future is subject to rational planning rather than to forces over which they have little if any control.

The contrast between the liberal notions of the self underpinning ‘western’ approaches to career guidance, and alternative worldviews comes across powerfully in the work of the Pakistani anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005). Between 1995 and 1997, Mahmood carried out ethnographic work among three classes of women who attend three different mosques in Cairo. Despite their diverse social background, all three groups are part of a grassroots pietist movement. Mahmood helps us understand the meanings that the women she interacts with

give to their actions. She provides us with a sensitive portrayal of women who consider the self not as referencing a pre-existing identity whose potential needs to be freed from the social constraints of tradition—which would be the redemptive narrative fostered by liberal approaches to career guidance. Rather, Mahmood shows how, for these women, the ‘self’ and the body are schooled into reproducing such core Muslim values as modesty, shyness, diffidence, sincerity, fear and awe, as well as *sabr* or forbearance, in a lifelong process of ethical formation, thus learning how to be pious in their everyday lives not just through wearing the veil, but through other forms of bodily enactments of piety.

The study, though obviously not written with career guidance in mind, has major implications for our topic. For the women in the mosque movement, their life project is neither to ‘find themselves’ nor to ‘express themselves’ through work. Rather, it is to construct a virtuous self through performative behaviour that shapes inward disposition.

The contrast in the approach to the self is nicely caught in the corresponding contrast between two women that Mahmood introduces us to in her narrative. Both Sana and Nadia are married and cannot bear children, a fact that causes them much personal suffering. Sana faces up to this pain and disappointment by privileging a strong personality and self-empowerment through self-esteem, a psychological capacity that, in her view, enables one to pursue self-directed choices and actions unhindered by other people’s opinions. She is not interested in virtuous patience and fortitude, such as that demonstrated by Ayyub in the Koran, whose *bravura* lay not in his ability to rise above the pain, but rather in the manner in which he *lived* his pain. “Where does *sabr* get you?” Sana asks Mahmood. “Instead of helping you to improve your situation, it just leads you to accept it as fate—passively” (p.172). Here, then, is a woman who corresponds to ‘western’ liberal notions of the self, resisting destiny, acting as a ‘free agent’, defining her own projects in line with her own desires, values, and goals, and not those of others. Our toolbox of career guidance repertoires and strategies would come in handy here.

Nadia, on the other hand, values *sabr*, not because it alleviates her suffering, but because it is a quality that helps her live her pain in a virtuous way. This is not defeatism or fatalism in the grips of the inertia of tradition, as inscribed in the meanings attributed to it by Sana, where virtues such as humility, modesty, and shyness “have lost their value in the liberal imagination and are considered emblematic of passivity and inaction, especially if they don’t uphold the autonomy of the individual” (Mahmood, 2005, p.174). Rather, *sabr*, in the sense described by Nadia, does not mark a reluctance to act, but is “integral to a constructive project: it is a site of considerable investment, struggle and achievement” (p.174).

One wonders how career guidance in the liberal, western understanding of the term, fits within this worldview as represented by Nadia, or whether it needs instead to be more radically reconstructed, rethought and 're-territorialised'.

Educational factors

A further set of factors that constrain and mould guidance services in the Arab states relate to the educational systems that we tend to find in the region. Most can be characterised by a number of difficulties that have a direct or indirect impact on the field of career guidance. These include (see UNDP, 2003; Masri, 2009; Mazawi and Sultana, 2010):

- A culture of élitism that prevails among system administrators, teachers and parents alike, where the legacy of historically meritocratic systems aiming at excellence for a few has led to a preoccupation with selectivity. This can lead to the “cooling out” of large numbers of disaffected students who, for reasons that are often social in origin, do not initially perform well at school, are accordingly labelled negatively by teachers, and then give up on formal learning.
- Curricula and teaching methods which emphasise memorising and rote learning rather than critical thinking, which stress coverage rather than mastery, and which place an emphasis on “knowing that” and to some extent on “knowing how” rather than on “knowing why” and on competencies generally.
- Pedagogical practices that do not take sufficiently into account the different learning needs and styles of pupils, and do not encourage or facilitate the development of autonomous learning.
- Assessment strategies which are summative in nature, with formal examinations –such as the *Tawjihi* rite of passage at the end of high school – determining much of the school curriculum and pedagogy, and where the primary purpose seems to be selection and channelling into different educational (and consequently occupational) pathways, rather than the formative processes of diagnosis, remediation and support that nurture and sustain individual choices and aspirations.
- Centralised administrative structures which are inimical to innovation and to flexible responses to challenges.
- Lack of sufficiently trained teaching staff, with weak – and sometimes non-existent – initial and continuing teacher education structures, particularly for the secondary cycle.
- Problems with equity, with major imbalances along urban-rural and coastal-interior axes, which manifest themselves through such indicators as learning achievement, repetition of levels, and drop-out rates.

The status hierarchy in terms of post-school opportunities tends to be very rigid, with those with top marks entering the ‘royal road’ of medicine, science and engineering degree courses, the next group entering the humanities, and the rump going into technical and vocational education. It is largely this hierarchy that determines futures, not individual choice or aspirations.

Concluding thoughts

What I have tried to do in this paper is to ask whether, when we promote career guidance as a social service, we are perhaps pushing a practice that has little if any cultural and social anchorage, particularly among the poorer sections of the population which make up the vast majority in both the urban and rural areas in the Arab states. To what extent is career guidance at all meaningful—or appropriate—in environments where labour markets are dramatically segmented into a small, regulated sector and a large, informal even underground sector where regulation is minimal, if it exists at all? How do notions of career guidance, deeply rooted in particular understandings of labour market theories and models, connect with situations where workers find employment on the strength of who they know, with family, political and religious networks being the main credential that has currency and force?

In some of the contexts that we encounter in the region, the very notion of choice is not just a luxury, but a cruel taunt for people whose main concern is to get some food on the table for that day. Has the shoeshine boy ever thought of his occupation as a ‘career’ or a ‘calling’—in the way we understand such words to mean—and has he ever thought of ever doing something different, or that doing something different was at all an imaginable option? What does career guidance mean to a girl in a small hamlet in Al Risha, who grows up in what, from our worldview, would epitomize a conservative environment, one which defines her future very narrowly in gender typified ways? Centuries of socialisation into specific male and female roles render any challenge to the gendered division of labour not only problematic, but highly disruptive of intricately and tightly connected social practices that extend beyond the world of work into the intimacies of family life, and one’s ethical convictions as to what is appropriate and what is ‘*haram*’—forbidden. How does one engage young people and adults in a discussion about choice, options, opportunities, self-determination when, in many cases, and especially in relation to the deprived social classes, life is generally experienced as a stream whose course has been set by others—whether that course-setting is engineered by God, nature, or powerful others such a father or the elder of the clan?

Key building blocks of the career guidance ‘doctrine’, including individualism, self-determination, the centrality of work in the project

of self-construction, autonomy in the face of authority, priority to self-actualisation, the striving to define and realise a life project—one and all seem somewhat out of phase with reality in, say, the conflict-ridden occupied Palestinian territories where the largest group of non-citizens in the world finds access to options and opportunities severely restricted by limited mobility and rights. How do our notions of career guidance translate into contexts such as the ones we encounter in several parts of the developing world?

There are no easy answers to such questions. It is my simple contention, however, that the first step to moving towards an answer is to clearly define the question or challenge before us. If we fail to seriously consider the key factors that shape the perception, understanding and implementation of career guidance services in the region, we risk finding ourselves in a situation where we promote the guidance agenda merely because it has become a policy trend internationally (Watts, 2008). It is difficult to build a strong house on such flimsy foundations, and initiatives will simply disappear into thin air once the donors and their project funds move on. From one perspective, the focus on career guidance in the region—despite all the obstacles referred to above—represents the planting of a seed that, in time, will grow deeper roots into a society, consolidating efforts to reorganize its economy, its labour markets, its cultures and traditions to make it more compatible with a western-type economy and polity. In other words, career guidance becomes one facet of the development agenda, encapsulating values and worldviews that reproduce, in miniature, the secular liberal model that, presumably, élites in developing countries aspire to copy.

From another perspective, however, one that is critical of western-type democracy and free market doctrines, the pressing project is not to consider how its citizens can become better liberals, but rather, how the world can be lived differently, in the face of the homogenizing, globalizing force of modernity that will brook no arguments for an alternative vision. It is fascinating to see how career guidance, not to mention other social practices, would be conceptualised from the point of view of such an alternative vision.

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