Chapter 3
SOCIAL CONTEXTS FOR CAREER GUIDANCE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

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It is difficult to fully understand either career guidance or individual behaviour in isolation from the social contexts in which they function. Neither individual behaviour nor career guidance occurs in a vacuum, removed from the continuous transactions with social norms, mass media, behavioural expectations, policies and regulations, cultural traditions, definitions of acceptable roles, beliefs and values that comprise the field of stimuli in which individual behaviour and career guidance processes are constantly immersed. Such stimuli occur with different levels of intensity, intimacy, relevance and credibility as they shape and reinforce individual behaviour or the form and substance of career guidance processes, programs, or systems.

Social contexts also provide the conditions that shape individual self-concepts or identity, the content and nature of the occupational structure, the form and freedom of access to work, and who is likely to obtain what types of work. Thus, the social context influences the choices available to individuals and reinforces some career behaviour while rejecting other behaviour. Elements of the social context also influence how guidance and family roles are conceived, the types of achievement and aspirations that are nurtured, and the types of knowledge about opportunities that is filtered to subpopulations of people through cultural, racial, and socioeconomic lenses. The social context, then, is also the seed-bed for career concerns that become the content of career guidance (Herr, 1996). Kleinman (1988), a psychiatrist and anthropologist, has put the transactional nature of human behaviour as follows:

In the anthropological vision, the two way interaction between social world [social context] and person is the source of thought, emotion, action. This mediating dialectic creates experience. It is as basic to the formation of personality and behavior as it is to the causation of mental disorder. (p. 3)

Individual behaviour and career guidance are also interactive. They come together based upon individual career concerns, dilemmas, decisions that have evolved from transactions with the people, objects, events, messages, and specific experiences that have occurred within the social context. The content of career guidance,
the dilemmas people experience, and the substance of the problems with which they have to cope do not typically arise without external triggering events. From a psychological perspective, the personal questions for which people seek help are, in large measure, functions of how they view current social or occupational expectations and opportunities for personal choice, achievement, productivity, social interaction, prestige, or the ability to use their abilities and interests.

Frequently, individual career dilemmas first must be understood in relationship to their context. In essence the question becomes how is the person experiencing his or her environment, his or her social context, as a guide to decisions by the individual and a counsellor about some course of career guidance interventions (e.g., career information, assessment, job shadowing, exploratory activities, individual counselling). Many of the individual career concerns that bring people to a relationship with a career practitioner differ from population subgroup to population subgroup (as related, for example, to discrimination, segregation, sexism and ageism as contextual factors for some persons) or nation to nation (as related to resource differences, cultural value systems, demographic distribution) as well as at different points in individual career development. Such individual career concerns and the related anxieties, information deficits, or indecisiveness become the content with which career guidance practitioners and individual counselees interact. Thus, at the most intimate of interactive processes, the micro-level, career guidance is a social activity engaged in by a career practitioner and a client or counselee; at a macro-level, career guidance is a socio-political process influenced by governmental policies, legislation, economics, politics, and by historical events. Throughout the last one hundred years or so, career guidance has become an increasingly important process in nations around the world as it responds to a variety of triggering and shaping mechanisms that emanate from economic and education changes, social policies, political transitions, and related phenomena.

Social Contexts: Some Perspectives

Social contexts are not unitary. Nor are they standardised across nations. They are comprised of political, economic, interpersonal, and cultural components that have varying types of relevance for different subpopulations – children, youth, adults, women and men, the abled and the disabled, the rich and the poor – at different times in their development and in their transitions across the life span. Each nation creates, or theorists, writers, journalists create for that nation, metaphors that try to capture the essence of that nation’s values, beliefs, or typical actions at a point in time. These metaphors address the characteristics of a nation in general, a specific conception of a nation, or subpopulations within that nation. Terms like the cybernetic or wired society, generation x, the rise of the creative class, the world’s policeman, the culture of efficiency, the age of discontinuity are each attempts to extract from national behaviour, or that of its various constituent groups, perspectives that summarize the processes, the personality characteristics, the types of behaviours that are normal or abnormal, acceptable or