

Conditions for learning in professional conversation

This paper explores the learning conditions in professional conversations. In this context, professional conversation refers to career guidance and career coaching for job seekers. Conditions for learning refers to the learning that takes place in the interpersonal interaction between the professionals and two adult jobseekers who participated in municipal labor market projects. I will be exploring how two unemployed adults experience their participation in professional conversation retrospectively. There seems to be an increased need for different forms of support and help for adults in managing and navigating through career-related issues, for whom complexity and scope can be significantly different from the purely educational and vocational choices for the youth (Kidd, 2006; Lindh and Lundahl, 2007). Individuals are expected to enter an unstable, unpredictable, and fundamentally restructured labor market, which affects how they manage their careers (Bengtsson, 2015). Career guidance and development has expanded from the choice of education and work for entry into the labor market, to managing a career from a lifelong perspective (Athanasou and Van Esbroeck, 2008a). We, however, lack relevant evidence and facts regarding the effects of guidance and coaching (Bimrose and Brown, 2015). Short-term efforts targeting jobseekers towards effective career decisions causes' confusion rather than ability to make decisions (Bullock-Yowell et al, 2014). Although participants learn strategies to cope with the situation they are in and move on, they can still experience psychological difficulties and contextual challenges in implementing these strategies (Borgen and Maglio, 2007). Other findings indicate that counsellors, for example, may find it difficult to identify which of their actions have positive effects on the outcome of the conversation. It is important, however, that the professional conversation leader personalizes his or her performance to the individual's needs. (Schedin, 2007).

Purpose and research questions

The purpose is to explore how professional conversations affects adults' learning in their career progress.

Research questions

- How do participants experience professional conversations?
- What learning conditions emerge from the participants' experiences?

Theoretical point of departure

This paper draws on the concept of learning from - Illeris (2009) holistic model for understanding the complex situation of career development. Learning is in Illeris's model seen as an ongoing interaction between three different aspects, namely contents, motivators (intensives), and social interaction (Illeris, 2009). Furthermore, the ongoing learning process relates to previous experiences that form how we learn, how we view ourselves, and the environment we live in. Alheit and Daussien (1999) describe this as biographicity. With this process of learning in mind professional conversation is an activity that constitutes a relationship between a participant and a professional that aims at creating a mutual dialogue and relationship based on equality for change (Wilhelmson and Döös, 2015). Recognition includes according to Honneth the three spheres of creating, revising, and recreating of self-image (Honneth, 2003). Buber (1990) means that personality develops between people, that is where we can seek answers to what thoughts, feelings and actions look like and their meaning. To explore the specific

learning conditions in professional conversations, I will use a combination of Honneth's (2003) theory of Recognition, and Bubers (1990) Theory of Relations. Together, Bubers and Honneth's theories are used to analyze the dialogue and relationship between the professionals and the participants. From a professional conversation perspective, Honneth's (2003) theory of recognition, as well as other researchers' (Ikäheimo and Laitinen, 2007; Voswinkel, 2001) development of the theory, appears reasonable to highlight key aspects related to the learning process in Illeris (2009) model. With the help of these theories and concepts, I seek to explore the conditions for learning in professional conversations.

Methodology

Narratives or conversations are significant in studying people's stories (Kohler-Riessman, 2008). This paper focuses on narratives with two job seekers participating in professional conversations. Brockmeier and Carbaugh (2001) regard narrative as human experience that appears in verbal form to understand the world and one self. Four interviews were conducted with two participants in municipal labor market projects for those who are long-term unemployed receiving professional support. During 2013-2015 I conducted interviews, both in conjunction with the professional support they were given, and during the follow-up interviews approximately one to one-and-a-half years later. The interviews lasted approximately 40 - 60 minutes each, and were recorded, transcribed then analyzed. The narratives with the two participants selected from a sample of 26 interviews with 16 participants (Langström, 2017). One of the chosen participants regarded the professional conversation as a positive, developmental experience, contributing to a further career, while the other described it as a negative experience leading to a stressful situation hindering further career development.

The interviews were analyzed during three stages. The first stage began during the interviews, where the participants' stories were crucial in the search for various circumstances. During the second stage, the interviews were transcribed, and all responses were numbered. I also made notes of expressions I interpreted as significant in the participants' story. My understanding of the participants' experiences of professional conversation deepened, as I listened, read the interviews, my notes, and added new comments to my notes. In the third stage, I made notes in the stories where I noticed disparities. As the analyzing process progressed, two main patterns were identified. The professional conversations either facilitated or prevented the learning process. It was not evident, at this stage, what or how the learning process was facilitated or hindered. Therefore, to gain this insight, I made continuous notes in the stories, where I observed variations related to the two main patterns. As the analyzing progressed, seven learning phases emerged from these variations. I could, then, trace the learning conditions based on the patterns, phases and variations, extracted from the stories.

The analysis is a two-way reflection between empirical findings and theory, at different abstraction levels. Therefore, the results did not merely emerge during a specific step-by-step order, but rather through processing the empirical findings together with the theories. The collected data has inevitably influenced the choice of theory, which, in turn, influences what I see and can analyze from the data, in order to attain a deeper understanding of how professional conversations affect learning conditions in career development. To relate theory and data to each other in this way is described by Qvarsell (1994) as abductive approach. Thus, the narrative and biographical approach in this study can be described as a relational and co-investigative approach.

The narratives from the two job seekers

In this section, I present Pia's and Tor's stories about their participation in professional conversation. Thereafter, I present the analysis of the different conditions for learning found in their narratives. Participants express two different feelings related to partaking in the project: Involuntariness and indifference. However, this does not seem to affect their continued feeling about the professional conversation itself. Here, two types of learning patterns have been identified in the participants'

experiences: facilitative and obstructive patterns of learning. The facilitative pattern (Pia) consists of three phases: confirmation phase, support phase, and development phase. The obstructive pattern (Tor) consists of a problem phase, followed by a demanding phase, and finally a resisting phase.

Pia's story

Pia describes herself as a young woman in her early twenties and a single mother of two children. Her education so far is elementary school and she has limited work experience. She has experiences of unemployment, different actions and meetings with professionals. Pia expresses that, so far, nothing has been helpful to change her situation. In her opinion professionals have always focused on her lack of competence and the obstacles it implies. When she started in this project, she had lost hope and saw it as something she was forced to do to receive social benefits. However, something changed her attitude, she means that the professional did not try to suggest any actions; she was interested in her situation and her point of view of her life. Pia says that she felt that she could begin telling her story without feeling evaluated and out of that story and the professional's questions about that story emerged a feeling of being seen and listened to. The beginning of a relation that expanded to a work alliance that slowly created a new hope. According to Pia's experience, the professional noted this hope in her story and that generated the professional to ask questions that revealed a strong social interest. Then the professional provided information about such professions and showed her how to use educational platforms in search of educational information. Pia expressed that she learned to listen to her own will and trust her own capacity because of the professional's adaption to her needs.

In the confirmation phase, the participant being positive towards the topics discussed and this gave Pia the opportunity to tell about how she felt about the sessions, without feeling categorized, evaluated or judged.

My feeling was that I was not yet one that she would say what I would do or what I would be, she just saw me ... and that was a big difference.

The whole situation created an environment to talk openly. Pia felt taken seriously, and this benefits the relationship with the professional, which, in turn, becomes the basis for a working alliance. During the support phase, Pia and the professional continued to search, in her story, for what needed to be discussed and dealt with.

In the past, there always been such a focus on the fact that I did not have any grades, that I should be happy if I could get a job at all or so. It is clear that I began to think so too.

In the investigative stage, changes emerged as Pia experienced increased control over her own situation, and as taking part in matters concerning her situation and life. This, then, opened for reassessing her self-image, and facing new opportunities.

Yes, that she was listening ... I was pretty determined that I just wanted a job because I thought I'll never come further than to the supermarket if I'm lucky, but then she listened and told me that "it sounds like you like this and this". That's true, I said because that's the way ... eh she was quite right and then so ... why would I want to sit in a supermarket when I could work with something I really want. Then she also showed how I would do to become what I really wanted to become and I changed my mind, I do not want to sit in the supermarket anymore.

Pia gradually began balancing her own conditions with societal conditions. Possible actions are supported and thus the next step appears. An important turning point seems to appear when Pia in the development phase experienced concrete support from the professional in dealing with the difficult issues they have been discussing. It is a confirmation that she is understood; and when the professional added something to that understanding, hope was generated.

Pia's accounts show that the goals set by societal agencies, and that are also present in the professional conversation, did not dominate the conversation. Pia got help to deal with the difficulties

that still existed, not as quick-fix solutions, but as suggestions or hypothetical questions. The sense of ownership and the level of influence increased as Pia took a stand to accept or reject something suggested by the professional. Whether it is possible to identify, define or achieve desired goals through one's own effort or the right support, it seems important that the experiences and dreams that people have are not evaluated as they are, but instead examined based on the person, and the situation she is in. Previous experiences and lessons learnt about one self, and the possibilities one has, can gradually be reviewed, reassessed, and adjusted. This, in turn, is the start of initial progress that can pave the way for both major and minor, but still crucial, changes. Based on these patterns of experiences the positive learning process displays feelings about the professional support, and its contribution to the learning process. By telling her story, Pia successively revised, and improved her self-esteem and self-image. This helped her in developing increased awareness of new opportunities to help change her situation. At this stage, Pia felt that she can present herself as the individual she is. Pia felt that the professional treated her genuinely, and that her situation, and what she wants, is taken seriously. This allows for reflection on the past, present and future, and paves the way for a different attitude towards societal conditions, which have previously been considered as obstacles. This new attitude can be either shallow or deep. The crucial point is that Pia is open for a changed perspective about the situation she is currently facing.

Tor's story

Tor explains that he is in his late twenties and has been working in the media industry, mostly TV-production's in shorter or longer projects. When he joined the project he had been out of work for two years, the unemployment insurance had expired, and he was dependent on social benefits. Tor is devious about the professional support which has not yet helped him to employment. Initially though he was slightly optimistic, the professional showed interest in him as a person and his situation and it had a calming impact on him. In Tor's view, this changed when the professional started giving him advice and pushed him to increase his job - search activity. He felt the pressure to do that he was told to do and to be effective, to please the professional and societal demands. He felt that the professional's agenda did not consider his needs or his voice. His feeling of guilt and shame in not succeeding in finding a job therefor increased. In fear of losing social benefits, he complied to the professional's demands by doing as he was told, but without any engagement or hope. To handle the situation and to keep some self-respect he secretly started resisting the professional, which he felt contributed to more bad conscious. After four months, the project stopped and Tor quitted, and a few weeks later, he found a job by his own effort. Tor meant that he learned that he should adapt rather than follow his own will and that the professional support conducted according to a standard procedure, without any adaption to his needs.

In the problem phase, Tor's initial approach was cautiously positive, but quite soon turned to being negative.

I was a bit more optimistic at first, not so exaggerated but ... yes ... the manager said yes, but this is what we will do with coaching and you will find some job within a month only and I thought that sounded optimistic so ... yes, it felt okay that this might be helpful anyway, so a bit more hopeful I was at the beginning, but it gradually declined.

When the professional focused on unemployment, unemployment became Tor's problem, and puts him in a situation of guilt and shame. The level of participation was reduced, and replaced by goals set by the societal institution, such as efficiency or economy; consequently, Tor's personal situation and goals were unheeded. In the demanding phase, Tor's previous negative experiences came to life, and this proved how easily negative experiences reappear, and how they affected him.

I felt like I could not resist, do not say no, I was basically forced to obey otherwise I could risk not receiving social allowance and then I could not afford to live, or even pay the rent.

The current negative feelings seem to prevent Tor, and the professional, from dealing with his situation. This became obvious, as the pressure to find work, as the feeling of not fitting into the norm, and the feeling that Tor's personal conditions and needs are not considered, increased. This led to the resistance phase where Tor seemed to turn his back on the professional, and instead took up a fight for his situation in different ways.

Hm ... yes it was tough ... but ... yes it was so big questions, I do not know what I'm ... but it was ... yes, but now you are 27 years now you have to know exactly what to do ... it was so big questions that like ... always encouraged decisions on so big questions that pertained to the rest of my life and that along with the demands of seeking so many jobs, constantly being examined from every possible angle ... I felt like a conditional release.

The feeling of guilt amounted as Tor became defensive by becoming more passive, and just doing what was required without any commitment. The experience of professional conversation became more of a struggle that tended to deplete his self-image, to the extent that he felt that he had no place in society, which also led to feelings of guilt and shame. This became evident as societal conditions dominated, and took the place of Tor's stories as well as the difficult situation he is in. The negative learning process highlights a demanding and performance-oriented professional support. This approach does not consider Tor's needs, which means that an already negative and fragile self-image is reinforced, and suspicion towards societal projects increased. Tor felt repressed in normative patterns dictated by societal structures which worsened his situation. Tor seemed to be forced into actions he had already tried and which has had not helped him get a job. This learning process confirms, what previous experiences of professional support have already established, that the support had its base in a norm he felt he didn't fit into. The negative learning process, thus, reinforced their already negative identity, prompting him to resist help, and, instead, struggle on his own. Tor learnt that he is a problem. He therefore develop both active and passive resistance methods, in order to handle the various demands.

Discussion

From the stories of the two participants, three types of conditions for learning could be identified: pre-existing conditions, organizational conditions, and counselling related conditions. The pre-existing conditions in the individual's life, and in the outside world prior to the counselling sessions, are divided into personal and social conditions. Organizational conditions relates to how the professional conversation has been organized and structured. These conditions include time available, continuity, and context. The counselling related conditions refer to the professional conversation, and to everything that makes learning possible. These are in positive terms: recognition, relationship, participation, and influence. It is, however, also possible that misrecognition, contempt, and resistance can cause negative conditions.

The societal and organizational conditions are thus affected by how the participants perceive the way the professionals recognize them. If the quality of recognition opens for I-you relationships, the next step would lead to participation, and I-that relationships (Buber, 1990). This, then, can either give more influence over the whole process or only over I-that relationship, which causes resistance. These relationships, in turn, predict what the outcome will be. Thus, it depends on whether the participant can reconstruct his or her biographicity (Alheit and Daussien, 1999). In other words, the participant's perceived ability to change his or her story, the way he or she perceives self, and the situation they are in, can affect the way they perceive their future. This is significant for benefiting or hindering the individuals' career development.

Furthermore, the participants' experiences of support seem to relate to different phases of the conversation, which seems to generate different learning conditions. In this study, I have used the concepts of no recognition, non-recognition and misrecognition (Honneth, 2003; Voswinkel, 2001) to further problematize and distinguish between positive and negative emotional experiences. Ikäheimo and Laitinen (2007) suggest that recognition can be monological or dialogical, and the importance of how the recognition is perceived, because this has significance for the interpersonal relationship (Buber,

1990). It is also in the first stages of meeting the personal and social conditions that we can determine whether learning processes become negative or positive. It is in these phases that the interpersonal relationships and dialogue are favored or hampered (ea.). The conversation is favored when the relationship is open to shifting between discussing personal, social, and societal situations without feeling threatened.

Based on these phases and conditions, I could explore how positive and negative learning processes emerge in professional counselling. This shows that learning conditions are formed in the conversation itself, where the participants' conditions, and other external conditions surrounding the conversation, determine the outcome of the learning process. In turn, it can be understood that continued career development depends on these different learning conditions. In the positive learning process, the influence on these learning conditions is high. Here, the counsellor helps participants to reconstruct their biographicity (Alheit and Daussien, 1999). The participants can, therefore, begin to expand their horizons, and envision a different career that they had not been able to see earlier. The negative learning process, is characterized by unchanged learning conditions, lack of ability to act and thus no career development. Here, societal and organizational conditions govern professional support, thereby ignoring the personal conditions of the participant. This inhibits the reconstruction of their biographicity (Alheit and Daussien, 1999), and instead they develop a resistance or struggle for their personal conditions.

From the learning processes identified above, learning takes place in small steps. The participants' learning, largely, depends on their previous experiences that have resulted in low self-esteem, and a suspicion towards participating in societal programs. The participants describe this as progress in small steps, where the next step depends on the previous one that learning builds on previous learning. This depends on what is added (opportunities or new obstacles), removed or transformed (obstacles or new opportunities). Moreover, learning takes place in relation to current experiences, situations, and conditions of the participants. That is, the participants' opportunity to tell their perceived situation and the conversation leaders' ability to accept that story. Learning, in this context, is a movement where participants' experiences gain new meaning. Experiences that participants earlier considered as obstacles in finding their way in life transform to an opportunity to understand a new way, and thereby more likely enable them to move towards the future. The ability to reflect upon one's past, present and future brings about movement in this direction.

The past seems to link with understanding and to be understood. The present link with managing; and the future link with creativity. The learning processes influenced by the tensions between, on one hand, the participant's self-image, and, on the other hand, societal demands on the outcome of the conversations. The learning process thus depends, largely, on how the professionals handle these conflicting demands in the conversation. The professional's attitude towards the participants seems to be important for the learning process, since it affects the participants' confidence or skepticism towards the professional helper. This attitude affects the working alliance between the two, opening or closing the possibilities for participation and influence. The professional's attitude towards the participants is crucial, since it affects the participants' confidence or skepticism towards the professional, especially if the participant feels listened to and taken seriously. This attitude has an impact on the conversation, both in the sense of what is discussed, and how it is discussed. It could be argued that this approach seems to be extra crucial at the beginning, but also that the professional attitude needs to be upheld throughout the process of the professional conversation, so that the sense of influence, and participation, can be maintained.

An important motivating force in the learning process seems to be how the participants' emotionally experienced the counselling sessions. Negative feelings seem to halt the learning process. Minor factors in the professional's attitude seem to be crucial for the direction of the learning process. The participants' increasing positive feeling is a good motivator for learning. Positivity increases when the participants feel taken seriously, feel being treated as an equal citizens of society, are able to tell their personal history, are given the opportunity to describe themselves, and the situation they are in, in their own words. The opposite feelings, like being categorized, evaluated, or judged, is something the participants have experienced from previous encounters with professionals, and authorities, during the time they were jobseekers. The emotional links to previous experiences of unemployment is a delicate

factor in the participants' experience, which the professional counsellor needs to deal with. These emotional links appear to be dependent on the tension between participants' views about their situation and society's rules and requirements. Learning is in Illeris's model seen as an ongoing interaction between content, motivators, and the ability to interact and dedicate self to the processes of learning (Illeris, 2009). The motivating dimension that includes emotions and the interaction dimension seems to be central to the direction of the learning process development.

The conclusion strongly suggests that certain pre-existing conditions highly influence the participants' experiences of professional support. Personal conditions are participants' previous experiences, not least their previous participation in different types of societal measures. How previous societal actions have been carried out also has impact on the learning process. Furthermore, the participants' experiences of support seem to relate to different phases of the conversations; and these phases are dependent on relational aspects, which, in turn, create different conditions for learning. This has an impact on how participants can take on their continued career process.

In the paper, I have used the usual term career development to show how learning affects development. Nevertheless, the word development has a positive tone, and it is, of course, good if the professional support leads to development. The study highlights, however, that this is not always the case. Professional support can also cause stagnation and difficulties, which is something else than development. Based on the results of this paper, I would like to advocate the use of career process instead of career development, when it comes to describing and understanding people's situation, in managing their careers. Already in the early 1990s, Bourdieu (1994) and Giddens (1991) described that many of the modern professions increasingly developed into conversational professions. That is, conversation as means to achieve some form of learning. I claim that this development has accelerated in terms of the general belief that professional conversation, used in different contexts, becomes an illusion of the healing power of professional conversation when it does not take into account all the other aspects of people's lives. Career development is such an example, that professional conversations, automatically, lead to career development. In the best-case scenario, it can lead to career development, but it requires professionals to consider the conversation related conditions, so that the career process really develops in that direction. Secondly, it is necessary that pre-existing conditions both allow development, and be handled based on the participants' perspective. Thirdly, organizational aspects be adjustable to current needs of the participants.

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