Type of contribution: paper

Title: “It’s not about my interests, it’s about where I will be accepted” – How do ethnicity and racism shape young people’s upper secondary school choices

Author: Anne-Mari Souto, senior lecturer, DrSocSc, Med, University of Eastern Finland, Career Counselling Education, Joensuu, anne-mari.souto@uef.fi

Abstract: Education is one of the most important resources for migrants to gain access to the labour market and to the “host” society more widely. So far, it has not been scrutinized in Finland whether school choices and paths are equally available to young people with migrant background. This study tackles this question from the young people’s point of view, and examines the ways in which ethnicity is connected to the young migrant's upper secondary school choices.

The study shows that when young migrant people consider their transitions after the compulsory school, their choices of vocational fields are relatively typified and constrained. Limited educational choices raise the question of racism relevant in the analysis: How do young people’s beliefs and experiences – their personal horizons developed within cultural, social and structural influence (Evans 2007; Hodkinson and Sparkles 1997) both shape and restrict what they see as possible and suitable for themselves.

Keywords: Ethnicity, racism, upper secondary school choices, horizons for action

Relation to conference theme: The discussion about the young migrant peoples’ agency is addressed in this paper via the concept of “horizons for action”. As Hodkinson and Sparkles (1997) have stated, this concept aims at avoiding the pitfalls of both implicit social determinism and viewing people as completely free, autonomous agents. Understanding the interplay between these polar views is necessary in elaborating transitions from social justice perspective.

General description: The study started with the interest to explore the process by which the post 16+ educational choices were made by young migrant people. During the first weeks of observation, certain constricted school choices and paths were shown to recur in the pupils’ plans. This “limitedness of choices” raised the question: do migrant background or ethnic origin restrict these future opportunities, and if so, how does this happen?

I understand ethnicity as a relational category rather than a substance that define groups and individuals. As Robert Brubaker (2004, 24-25) has stated, focusing on ethnic categorizations enables us to analyze processes; showing especially how people and organizations do things with ethnic and racialized categories and what kind of consequences these processes have. I ask how ethnic categories and migrant experiences are used – or not used – to make the sense of the pupils’ future possibilities, strengths and weaknesses, as well as to frame life stories, self-understanding, and education and work transitions.

The decision-making process itself is approached in my study with the conceptual framework of horizons for action. As Phil Hodkinson and A.C. Sparkles (1997, 34) have argued, horizons for action mean, “the arena within which action can be taken and decisions made. Habitus and opportunity structures of the education and labour market both influence horizons for action and are inter-related, for perceptions of what might be available and appropriate affect decisions, and opportunities are simultaneously subjective and objective”.

This reminds us that opportunities are not just out there to be chosen. This is important in light of the current political discourse that emphasizes the assumptions of individual freedom and responsibility to choose. Racism and gendered occupational images restrict what can be viewed and chosen among the migrant young people.

Besides these social and cultural structures, the decision-making process is also a question of the individuals themselves, their actual resources in specific contexts (or fields as Bourdieu states). Hodkinson and Sparkles have pointed out that people make pragmatical, rather than rational, decisions concerning their transitions to education and work. These decisions are also influenced by emotions. Furthermore, decisions are made in negotiations and relations with others – peers, family members, teachers, school counsellors, and thus they can be only understood in terms of one’s life history and interaction with significant others.

Based on the above, agency is different in different life histories and societal positions and could be bounded (Evans 2007) in many ways. These inequalities and differing horizons for action are a crucial perspective to be noticed in promoting social justice in the career counselling practices (Hooley, Sultana & Thompsen 2018). My analysis exposes these unequal possibilities. I will analyze empirically an actual decision-making process of the migrant youth with different backgrounds, and their counselling discussions with their school career counsellors.

**Method/Methodology:** The study is conducted in three secondary and one vocational upper secondary school in eastern Finland during the years 2013-2014. The qualitative data for the study consist of the research interviews of young people (31) and their school career counsellors (16). Interviewed young people have born i.e. Somalia, Iran, Russian, Estonia, Thailand, Vietnam, and some African countries. Besides interviewing, I have also observed counselling discussions and lessons in those schools attended to the study. In this paper, the focus is on the youngster’s reasons for their upper secondary school choices and their experiences of counselling they have had for. I have used dialogical content analysis (Koski 2011) in categorizing my data.

I have committed to an anti-racist research approach in my study. It entails giving attention to the nature of the words and concepts that are used in research, both in the collection of the data and writing the reports (see Rastas 2007). Racism as well as ethnicity are conceptualized as socially and culturally constructed rather than essentialised phenomena in this approach. In addition to this, I have been open to my affiliations as an anti-racist activist and my previous researches to my interviewees: all this have made the question of racism, usually seen as absent phenomena in the Finnish school context (Souto 2011), visible and real problem to pose. Moreover, these discussions have given me the possibility to reflect my privileged position as a white middle class female researcher conducting the study of ethnicity and transitions. All these methodological and ethical considerations are crucial in understanding the issue of agency from the social justice perspective.

**Outcomes:**
The study shows that certain vocational fields (i.e. nursing, tourism, business) are recurrently represented in the choices of the migrant young people (Souto 2017). Limited educational choices have some common “ethnic meanings”: some of these meanings and reasons are related to the fact that the student him/herself defines him/herself ethnically in a particular way, and partly to the fact that he/she is defined racially and ethnically in a certain way but not as a Finn by others. For example, on the one hand many of the interviewed wanted to work in the field of tourism or travelling because these fields of businesses represented multiculturalism and multilingualism that were personally important and close to them. On the other hand, they also thought that they were easily accepted in those occupational positions as a black woman or a Russian-speaking boy. All these examples make visible the restricted and bounded nature of possibilities for agency and horizons for action in transitions to education and work.

It is also worth mentioning that career counsellors do recognize this process of segregated choices among their pupils, but they hesitate and avoid topicalizing and discussing it. Especially they are reluctant to ask about racism and discrimination their students have faced.

References:


