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To cite this article: Marjorie McCrory (2022): Theorising agency for socially just career guidance and counselling scholarship and practice, British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, DOI: 10.1080/03069885.2022.2026881

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2022.2026881

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Published online: 24 Feb 2022.

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Theorising agency for socially just career guidance and counselling scholarship and practice

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ABSTRACT

The notion that scholars and practitioners of career ought to direct their attention towards agency is axiomatic. However, there is little explicit discussion in the literature of how we might conceptualise agency to orient our work towards issues of social justice. Career work draws on a range of disciplinary theoretical perspectives and so, in conceptualising agency, we must address the foundational issue of adequately theorising the relationship between individual and social aspects of career. This paper presents a critique of Archer’s work on agency as a basis for introducing Stetsenko’s post-Vygotskian “Transformative Activist Stance” as an ontology of persons and social life in which agency is meaningfully individual, ineluctably social and continually directed towards bringing a desired world into being.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 October 2021
Revised 9 December 2021
Accepted 4 January 2022

KEYWORDS

career; career counselling; agency; social justice

Introduction

In this paper, I wish to advance and discuss three propositions relevant to the theorisation of agency for career work (which includes career-related scholarship, research and practice).

The first proposition is that despite the centrality of the notion of agency to any discussion of career and, more specifically, to the advancement of socially just career practice which seeks to effect change at the level of the individual and of society, agency remains largely under-theorised in the career development theory literature.

The second is that this under-theorisation results from the specific disciplinary origins of career development theories and in particular from a failure to adequately conceptualise the nature of the relationship between “the individual” (agents) and “the social” (structures) in explanations of career development. Despite some notable attempts to address this fundamental issue, I will argue that agents and structures have been theorised as ontologically distinct or, at best, as belonging to distinct epistemic “domains”.

Respectively, these propositions identify and define a problem. The third proposition will attempt to address that problem. I will propose and develop a conceptualisation of agency that proceeds from a critique of the work of Margaret Archer (2000, 2003, 2007) to consider the salience of Vygotskian “socio-cultural” theory, specifically, drawing on the way in which that tradition has been extensively reconstructed and developed in the work of Anna Stetsenko (2011, 2014, 2015, 2017). Stetsenko’s theoretical premises regarding the mutually constitutive nature of the individual and the social lead us to a potential conceptualisation of agency adequate to the task of reconstructing career scholarship, research and practice that is meaningfully directed towards the realisation of
social justice. In Stetsenko’s conceptualisation, agency is both meaningfully individual and ineluctably social. It is an emergent property of a fundamentally creative human consciousness that seeks not merely to contribute to what is here and now, but is always directed towards a vision of the future (albeit sometimes implicit and unrecognised as such) and the bringing of that future into being.

In Stetsenko’s terms, our thinking and acting are always bringing our selves (our world), and the world, into being. Such a conceptualisation of agency requires that we consider the ethico-political dimension of the work that we do as we seek to explain how careers develop and as we seek to support and influence individuals and groups as they make career-related decisions. It leads us to a question that ought to be central both to careers work and to work directed towards the advancement of social justice: what kind of world are we collectively bringing into being as we make our way (and do our work) in the world as it is now? In this sense, agency is as salient in relation to what we do when we are working in the field as it is to the clients our work will impact upon, whether directly (as practitioners) or indirectly (as scholars and researchers).

**Agency, career and social justice**

We can usefully begin with a broad definition of agency as the capacity of persons, or subjects, to deliberate or reach decisions and to act upon those deliberations or decisions to effect intentional change. This “working definition” of agency allows for the possibility that persons may act meaningfully and intentionally as individuals or as part of a grouping or community, either to effect change in their own lives and/or to effect change in the lives of others. Despite more recent contributions to the career literature that focus on the need for community-based models of practice (e.g. Thomsen, 2017) career practice remains most often directed towards supporting individuals to effect change in their own lives and this tends to apply whether the practice intervention is delivered in a one-to-one or a group setting. However, although it is rarely the explicit focus of career practice, in focusing on individuals’ capacities to deliberate upon, and enact change in, their own lives, such practice is, at least implicitly or potentially, always concerned with how that change might affect and change the lives of others and the world itself. There is a growing recognition of the broader socio-political impacts of both career practice and actual careers, with calls to more explicitly articulate career scholarship, research and practice to social justice agendas (Hooley et al., 2017). Our careers (regardless of how broadly or narrowly we define them) have tangible impacts in, and on, the world and career practice can impact on the decisions that people make about how their careers develop.

Career development theories, too, are concerned with agency. At their most useful, these theories seek to interrogate the nature of the relationship between what individuals can intentionally do to effect change (agency) and the social relations, forces and/or contexts (structures) that may impact upon, or bound, individual agency. Nevertheless, conceptualisations of agency are too often implicit or underdeveloped in career development theories and as a result of this, we do not yet have a sufficiently robust conceptualisation of agency upon which to build career practice and research agendas that could further the cause of social justice.

As Hooley et al. (2017) rightly contend, social justice is a contested concept. We may agree that social justice agendas seek broadly to address the causes and effects of intersecting inequalities that shape and pattern the lives of individuals and groups in society, but we must also be mindful of the fact that social justice is neither an a-historical nor an a-political concept. In Western democracies, calls for social justice were, until recently, most likely to find expression through collective political action and representation via institutions such as Trades Unions. The fact that we now encounter the rhetoric of social justice articulated within broadly neoliberal policy discourses and policy agendas, including those which shape the delivery of careers services (e.g. Scottish Government, 2020), should alert us to the danger of assuming either that we all mean the same thing when we talk about social justice, or that we will agree on how it can be enacted. Notwithstanding these fundamental issues, I
will proceed from an understanding of social justice that assumes that social injustice is characterised by negative and inhibiting impacts on people’s lives and opportunities of a range of intersecting inequalities and that these injustices “show up” in concrete ways as individuals share, and make sense of, their experiences as they work with with career practitioners. The effects of social injustices are experienced at the level of the individual and can be identified at the level of groups in society, but, crucially, it is not always possible for individuals acting as individuals to tackle the causes and/or the effects of the inequalities that lead to social injustice.

Taking all of this into account, socially just career work requires that we move beyond individualised conceptualisations of career and of agency and move towards thinking about the inherently collective and ethico-political dimensions of career decision-making, career development and career scholarship, research and practice. In broad terms, then, the development of socially-just career practice requires us to attend to “social context” as something that is not meaningfully separate from people (Stetsenko, 2011). Socially just career practice requires more than the recognition that careers develop in social contexts that are unjust. It requires that we consider how career decision-making, actually developing careers and career work are implicated in making and shaping unjust social contexts. If we are to commit to socially just career practice, we need to base our activity both on a robust theoretical understanding of agency as a fundamentally social phenomenon, and on an understanding of the ways in which agency is implicated in the social practices that shape our world, for better and for worse.

**Towards an ontology of agency for socially just career work**

*Agents, structures and the politics of career*

Scholars, researchers and practitioners of career will almost certainly have encountered Tony Watts’ insight that,

> careers education and guidance is a profoundly political process. It operates at the *interface* between the individual and society, between self and opportunity, between aspiration and realism. It facilitates the allocation of life chances. Within a society in which such life chances are unequally distributed, it faces the issue of whether it serves to reinforce such inequalities or to reduce them. (Watts et al., 1996, p. 351, my italics)

Watts’ quote elegantly reflects an axiom that those who have an interest in career understand well, regardless of whether their work is theoretically focused, or focused on the practicalities of helping others negotiate concrete experiences of making their way in the world: that career, however we may conceptualise it, and regardless of how individual careers may develop, cannot be understood as either a merely individual or an entirely social, or structural phenomenon. Furthermore, the quote reminds us that careers develop in social contexts that are made and shaped by political actors and actions. Thus, careers develop as a result of the intentional actions of people directed towards certain ends and they do so within broader social contexts that are always developing as a result of the intentional actions of people directed towards certain ends (political actions). The latter contention holds even when political actions are opaque, operating in ways, and at levels, that are less than accessible to, and may not be fully understood by, individuals making career decisions and enacting change in their own lives. Those who may be working with individuals to facilitate change may also be more or less aware of the political dimension of the broader and specific contexts in which they are working. The salience of political actions, and their impacts on careers and career work often becomes clearer at times of crisis, as evidenced by recent events such as Brexit (McCrorry & Thompson, 2019) and the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Institute of Student Employers, 2020). These insights add another dimension to our understanding of agency; that agency cannot be conceptualised as “a-political”, and this holds whether we are considering *explicitly* political actions or peoples’ routine, everyday actions.
Career development theories and the problem of agency

Watts’ statement also points, somewhat tantalisingly, to a more fundamental issue relating both to the way in which career has tended to be conceptualised and the fact that theoretical conceptualisations have practical implications for those working in the field. The word interface provides a clue to the ongoing theoretical preoccupation with a problem to which various solutions have been proffered. This problem is both an ontological and an epistemological one; it concerns our assumptions about, on the one hand, the nature of persons and the social world and, on the other, how we can adequately express our conceptualisations of them and the nature of the relationship between them.

In general terms, we tend to conceive of career as a phenomenon that can be understood only if we grasp how the individual and the social aspects of it interact, or interface. The implicit assumption is that the “individual” and the “social” (or agents and structures, in sociological terms) belong to two separate or distinct domains, albeit that they always and only exist in some relationship (perhaps sometimes in some tension) with one another. More sophisticated attempts to theorise career development are premised on the notion that we cannot usefully explore one without consideration of the other (see e.g. Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; McMahon & Patton, 2006). In these theories of career development, as in practice, it is recognised that individuals have a degree of “autonomy” in relation to the processes that are implicated in career decision-making, but that this is not unbounded. People face what we often describe in practice as “barriers” and these are not always amenable to change by individuals acting individually. We may believe, and we are often right to do so, that professional interventions can help individuals (or groups) to deliberate upon, and even to disrupt, the assumptions they make about themselves, others and the world, but we generally accept that there are limits to what can be achieved by such interventions alone and certainly so in relation to effecting change at the level of communities and societies.

Watts’ statement, even as it highlights fundamentally important aspects of career and career work, also highlights the failure, when theorising career, to draw upon understandings that offer a sufficiently robust ontological basis for the co-constitutive nature of what we generally conceptualise as individual and social “domains”. Theorists of career have come from different disciplinary backgrounds and have, in many significant respects, been “bound” by disciplinary paradigms, notwithstanding serious and significant attempts to recognise the limits of these boundaries and to move beyond them in various ways. For example, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) mobilise Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” to attempt to adequately address both the individual and social aspects of career decision-making, suggesting that individuals, though socialised in ways that are shaped by “objective” structures are not ultimately determined by structural (class) position. This is a critically important idea if we wish to advance the cause of social justice, for it gives salience to the notion that individuals possess agency, as well as providing a basis upon which to build an understanding of how we might best intervene to facilitate the kind of change that may be required to bring about more socially just societal arrangements. However, although developing a critique of Bourdieusian conceptualisations is not the focus of this paper, it is important to note that serious critiques of Bourdieu’s theory highlight its “unwitting deterministic bias” (Rafanell, 2013, p. 1). Rafanell’s critique ultimately undermines the ontological basis for agency presented in Careership as well as calling into question how we might best intervene to address inequalities; somehow expanding client’s “horizons for action” within the “field” of career may not be enough (Hodkinson, 2008). In the same way, Giddens’ structuration theory, which presents an elegant statement of the co-constitutive nature of the individual and the social mobilised usefully in relation to social justice and career by Bilon (2017), is critiqued by Archer (2000) as falling short of developing a sufficiently robust ontology of agency. Archer’s critique of Giddens “central conflationism” forms part of the discussion that will follow in this paper.
Conceptualising agency

Despite the aforementioned examples, it is not my intention here to revisit the range of career development theories that continue to provide salient insights for scholars, researchers and practitioners of career. Rather, I wish to move on to suggest how we might conceptualise agency in order to develop a more robust basis for socially just career work. We have seen that agency is fundamentally implicated in career decision-making, career development and career work. We have discussed the notion that career decisions and the actions resulting from them are meaningfully intentional (agentic) and that even where this intentionality is construed as limited to the domain of the individual that, as a result of the fact that career decisions and actions impact on others and on the world, career cannot ever be considered to be “a-political”. Practitioners, where they are implicated in the career decision-making of others, are also acting politically. Career development theory and research demonstrate that careers are neither singularly individual nor necessarily structurally-determined and have attempted to account for the relationship between individual and social dimensions of career. These theoretical models have influenced models of practice. However, I have suggested that we have yet to adequately conceptualise the nature of the relationship between the individual and social in a manner that provides us with an “ontology of agency” and that this is a fundamental problem as we seek to make sense of careers and career practice, especially in times of crisis and as we seek to advance socially just agendas.

Archer and the problem of agency

I wish to move now to more explicitly consider the development of a conceptualisation of agency that could serve to inform socially just career work and to do so by taking the work of Margaret Archer as a starting point. The importance of Archer’s work, in this context, is that it is a contribution made in the broadly sociological tradition in which individual agency is conceptualised as a phenomenon bounded in some way by social structures. However, Archer is working within the social theoretical tradition of critical realism, and, reflecting the focus of the critical realist project, seeks to critique the notion that individuals are merely “determined” by social structures. As such, Archer’s work offers a useful starting point for a consideration of an ontological basis for agency based upon consideration of the relationship between its individual and social dimensions which allows for the possibility of transformative social action.

If we take seriously the notion that any attempt to address issues of social injustice demands that we engage with the social and political (structural) processes implicated in both career decision-making and the way in which careers develop, it is not sufficient to theorise agency as a purely “psychological” phenomenon. Within the psychological disciplinary paradigm, agency is often discussed in relation to self-efficacy (Chen, 2006). However, despite the utility of cognitive, social-cognitive and (most recently) neuropsychological theories in examining micro-level (and potentially meso-level) processes relevant to career development, such theories do not provide us with a sufficiently robust basis upon which to theorise agency if we recognise agency as neither an entirely unbounded nor entirely individual or even “interior” phenomenon. Individuals’ capacity to affect change is impacted upon by both the sense (meaning) that they make of their context(s) and by social forces which are very often outwith the control of individuals acting as individuals. Even where the “psychological” paradigm is expanded (e.g. Savickas, 2019) to take account of the centrality of processes of meaning-making in relation to career development, there is insufficient theorisation of the impacts of power relations materialised in social (and, arguably, in interpersonal) structures.

Archer and “conflationisms”

Archer seeks to address the problem of explaining the capacity of subjects to effect transformative social change (agency) by critiquing the assumptions about subjects that are explicit and implicit in
social theory. This critique proceeds from consideration of various forms of what Archer refers to as “conflationisms” (2000), which, she argues, prevent a true understanding of the foundations of human agency and the emergent properties of persons. Archer outlines and then rejects three forms of conflationism. Theories that reflect “downwards conflationism” encompass various forms of structuralism (which deny agency) and in which persons are over-socialised. Theories that reflect “upwards conflationism” deny any emergent power at the level of the social and focus on the emergent power of processes of meaning-making and interaction that take insufficient account of socially-structured power relations. Both upwards and downwards conflationism are considered by Archer to be fundamentally reductionist. They do not adequately account for human action motivated by concerns and commitments which necessarily presuppose (in Archer’s view) a sense of self that is not reducible to either purely social (downwards conflationism) or purely linguistic (discursive) constructions (upwards conflationism). However, Archer also rejects non-reductionist theoretical attempts to overcome structuralist and individualist/discursive forms of determinism which posit social structures and agents as somehow mutually constitutive. In so doing, she rejects a third form of conflationism which she calls “central conflationism”. It is Archer’s critique of central conflationism that is most significant in this context. I have signalled the importance of considering the co-constitutive nature of the relationship of the individual and the social both in relation to understanding career and the search for a robust conceptualisation of agency upon which to base socially just career work. Archer’s critique suggests that this may be a misguided enterprise.

Archer’s critique of Giddens’ (1979) structuration theory most clearly highlights her problem with central conflationism. Giddens elaborates a position in which structure and agency are co-dependent. Archer points to the fundamental difficulty that she considers this presents for the analysis of social change (and it is the capacity of agents to act on the world that she seeks to explain). In a fundamental sense, the central conflationists, are, for Archer, capable only of describing a present state of affairs, and cannot deal with the manner in which persons act upon structures to change them. The notion that structures and agents are mutually constitutive appears particularly abhorrent to Archer because she considers that if structures are part of people and vice versa, the possibility for human subjects to deliberate on contexts and to critique and seek to change structures that were not of their making or choosing is neutralised. In other words, Archer objects to Giddens’ (and others who would be considered central conflationists) attempts to elaborate an ontological rather than a merely epistemological position. For Archer, to assert that structure and agency are co-determining is a way of describing the nature of our being (in the world), rather than just a way of conceptualising the nature of our relationship (as persons) with the world. For Archer, mutual constitution denies the possibility that agency exists as an emergent property of humans – it strips from the subject any autonomous power to make an ethical judgement about how things are and to act upon it. For Archer, agents must be “analytically decoupled” from structures in order to be able to act upon them to change them. This analytical decoupling is essential in order to preserve a focus on the search for those capacities of persons that are uniquely human.

**Archer’s modes of reflexivity and the internal conversation**

At this stage, it is useful to reiterate the fundamental importance of the critical realist position in relation to Archer’s theorisation of agency. Critical realism, based upon the philosophical work of Roy Bhaskar (1998) takes as a focus the possibility for transformative social action. In other words, it is concerned with the possibility for action which goes “beyond the reproduction of existing social structures brought about through the operation of power” (or routine activity), and which may bring about social change. Thus, “it has been concerned with the scope for human agency, individual subjectivity, reflexivity, and their relationship to social structures” (Collins et al., 2015, p. 4).

Archer is concerned to provide a theory of human agency which allows for an analysis of change and of causation. This leads, once the rejection of all three forms of conflationism is complete, to the
search for a mechanism which explains human agency as an emergent property that enables subjects to act upon, and change, that which already exists in social life. Archer insists (following Bhaskar) upon the necessary analytical decoupling of structure and agency. People are part of a social order that shapes their lives, but they are not reducible to it (Collins et al., 2015) and so, must be analytically decoupled from it if their essentially human capacity for agency is to be properly understood. Archer’s task, therefore, becomes that of accurately describing a mechanism which allows human beings to be conceived of as ontologically “separate” from social structures, and which allows for their deliberation upon these structures. Reflexivity, for Archer (2007), is such a phenomenon and reflexivity is conceptualised as an emergent property of subjects. The situations that subjects confront are objectively shaped by structural and cultural properties which constrain and enable subjects’ actions. Actions are produced through reflexive deliberation in these situations characterised by Archer as occurring through “inner speech”. The phenomenon of inner speech is conceived of as genuinely interior and possessing causal efficacy (2003). Inner speech (qua reflexive deliberation) is what allows subjects to negotiate the interplay of their own concerns and their social environment (2007).

However, Archer acknowledges the methodological impossibility of accessing inner reflexive dialogue and when considered empirically, must account for what appears to be the variability of reflexive deliberation and, arising from it, the variable trajectories which unfold as people make their way through the world. Inner speech, or reflexive deliberation, produces variable results in terms of the actions in response to social contexts (structures) to which it leads and this must be accounted for. If we accept that inner speech as reflexive deliberation is what leads to action in the world, how can we account for the differential ways in which subjects deliberate and therefore act? This question leads Archer to identify specific “modes of reflexivity”. These may be more or less in evidence through peoples’ thinking and acting, and they may come to define a general disposition towards being in the world.

Scambler (2013) reiterates Archer’s notion of the “internal conversations” of individuals as constituting reflexivity in action and characterised as, “a genuinely interior phenomenon, and one that underwrites the private life of the social subject” (Scambler, 2013, p. 147). It is the nature of subjects’ concerns which lead them to exhibit a dominant mode of reflexivity. Scambler goes on to summarise the four modes of reflexivity from Archer’s empirical observations:

1. Communicative reflexives are characterized by internal conversations that require completion and confirmation by others before they result in courses of action.

2. Autonomous reflexives sustain self-contained internal conversations, leading directly to action.

3. Meta-reflexives are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical also about the prospects of effective action in society.

4. Fractured reflexives are those whose internal conversations intensify their distress and disorientation rather than leading to purposeful courses of action. (Scambler, 2013, pp. 147–148)

Internal conversations constitute the deliberations of the individual in their “inner world” working out how to act in the “outer world”. Reflexive deliberation takes account of the subject’s concerns and commitments (we might say, their values) as well as the contextual circumstances in which they find themselves. A dominant (habitual) mode of reflexivity may then emerge, depending in part upon one’s concerns and commitments and in part upon one’s interpretation of circumstances. Agency, as agentic action, derives from modes of reflexivity.

We could reflect at this point on whether, and how, Archer’s modes of reflexivity, emerging as the mechanism for agency based upon the critique of social-theoretical “confusionisms”, might help us to make sense of career and of the capacity of clients, practitioners, scholars and practitioners to direct their focus towards enacting transformative change in various ways. However, to do so leads us to a central problem in Archer’s theorisation. The empirical observation of differential modes of reflexivity which are then posited as fundamentally characteristic and causal in terms of...
an individual’s orientation to, and engagement with, the world, seems to consign many individuals to a relatively impotent state for most of the time, and it is not immediately obvious how that might be remedied, if reflexivity qua agency is an interior/emergent property of persons. Communicative and fractured reflexives seem to be somewhat doomed in relation to agentic action. To address this problem we must consider whether Archer does in fact adequately account for, or indeed even identify, processes which adequately explain the nature of the relationship between individuals’ thinking and acting, how it is that some subjects’ reflexive deliberations seem to be fatally limited and whether, therefore, she elaborates a sufficiently robust ontological position. How is it that individuals come to develop these habitual modes of reflexivity and how can they be “genuinely interior” without some recourse to the transcendental?

Reclaiming the unity of the individual and the social

It may be that the search for an alternative ontological position does, after all, require that we account for the ineluctably social nature of human agency whilst at the same time avoiding (as Archer has rightly attempted to do) any crudely deterministic position which denies human creativity and a capacity to act upon the world in a transformative (creative, or generative) manner. Thus, rather than contend, as Archer has done, that it is problematic to make structure part of people and vice versa, we ought to consider how structure and people may be considered to be meaningfully intertwined, and at the same time, to elaborate a position which allows an alternative to the conceptual/analytical dualism of structure and agency in the sociological tradition (which also, arguably, inhibits interdisciplinary empirical and theoretical research agendas). The crux of such an ontological position rests upon the notion that creative, transformative action is part of what is routinely done by human beings and is not merely the preserve of some people acting in certain circumstances as is suggested by the fuller exposition of Archer’s theory of modes of reflexivity.

The basis for such a position can be found outside the mainstream sociological/social theoretical tradition and is developed in the body of work of Anna Stetsenko, who has sought to reconstruct the theoretical contribution of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which is itself based upon the empirical and theoretical contribution of Lev Vygotsky, his colleagues and followers. Vygotsky’s work has generally been presented in heavily edited translation to Western audiences as part of the theoretical tradition associated with a “critical” or “materialist” psychology, and Vygotsky’s work on child development and learning is widely known and applied in the field of educational research, theory and practice. However, Vygotsky and his colleagues were concerned with the broader problematic of the development of individuals in (often rapidly changing) social contexts and their agenda and methods have a potentially broader import. It is significant that Vygotsky led a group of researchers in the Soviet Union from 1924 until his death in 1934; had he lived longer, his work would certainly have been impacted upon by the rise of Stalinism, and, it is notable that his work (and that of his followers) was proscribed during the Stalinist period. Therefore, it was only when a full translation of Vygotsky’s “Thinking and Speech” (1987) became available in English, that the broader implications of the Vygotskian research agenda began to be explored. Significantly, Collins et al. (2015) argue that,

there are striking overlaps between the work of this [Vygotsky’s] group and that of the critical realists […]. He and his collaborators […] were intensely focused, in both theory and in actual practice, on processes of social change, the relationship between economic, political and cultural change, and the connections between macro-level processes, the lives of communities, and the inner worlds and inner speech of individuals. (p. 12; my italics)

Vygotsky’s work is also connected to the social theoretical tradition as a result of the foundational influence upon it of historical materialism, albeit articulated to a research agenda more closely focused on human development than on the development of societies. Thus, Vygotsky and his colleagues (notably Luria and Leontiev) were concerned with the impact of historically developing (and enduring) social structures on processes of human development; processes which in the
psychological tradition are often considered as quite separate, both ontologically and epistemologically, from the socio-historical contexts in which they develop, and which in the sociological tradition are just as often interpreted as determined by those contexts and effectively stripped of any emergent power.

In broad terms, Vygotsky posited human development as emerging through people’s attempts to transform their existing environment. However, this activity, in Vygotskian terms, is always collaborative insofar as it involves the creation, use and transmission of “mediational means” or “tools”, the most significant of which is language. These tools (including language) are what make human activity uniquely human; the development of mediational means is the development of human social life. Furthermore, in the process of making and continually transforming (bringing into being) their world, humans make and transform their own lives.

What is most significant in the Vygotskian tradition is the understanding that human activity is enmeshed with thinking and that “inner speech” (the internal conversation, in Archer’s terms) cannot be conceived of as a “genuinely interior” phenomenon which relies upon an entrenched binary opposition of person and environment (or social context) with the development of human consciousness and experience conceptualised as “pre-linguistic” phenomena (as Archer contends). Tools, and specifically language, allow for the development of meanings (and of shared, if not fixed, meanings), but these do not exist without any connection to the socio-material world in which human consciousness and thinking materialises and develops. It is not necessary to become diverted here in a discussion of the epigenesis of such sociality. A parallel discussion of those aspects of the issues we are grappling with here is well-developed in the social anthropological literature, perhaps most notably in the work of Tim Ingold (2011). It is worth noting that Ingold’s work contains much that is compatible with Stetsenko’s expansive reconstruction of the Vygotskian tradition.

What distinguishes the Vygotskian position from the critical realist position, is that there is no separation of “orders of reality” nor a dualistic understanding of cause and effect. People have a particular biological “form”, they engage in various ways with what appear to be enduring social “structures”, but these are not separate “realities” or domains per se. Most significantly, the Vygotskian conceptualisation of “inner speech” or the “internal conversation”, which is well-known, but often misrepresented as crudely “socially constructivist” in Western interpretations, is crucial in the development of a genuinely “subjective” reality. As Collins et al. explain,

it is formed in a process of socialisation which sees the internalisation of social exchanges, such that an interpersonal process is transformed into an intra-personal one. In other words, the ‘internalisation of socially rooted and historically developed activities’ (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57) is the distinguishing feature of human subjectivity and selfhood- and so too of our inner speech [...]. This was seen not as a process of transference of the outer world to an inner world, but as the process of creation and development of an inner world through participation in ongoing collaborative social activity. [my italics] (2015, p. 14)

Stetsenko’s “transformative activist stance”

Stetsenko’s work expands upon the Vygotskian position to posit an ontological basis for an exploration and understanding of human subjectivity, agency and of human social life that challenges foundational premises implicit (and explicit) in Western psychological and sociological disciplinary traditions. From Stetsenko’s position, the possibility for an engaged interdisciplinary scholarship (somewhat akin to Freire’s position), directed towards transforming the present, begins to emerge. Stetsenko’s position begins to address the difficulties inherent in attempting to understand the relationship between individual experience and the possibilities for social action directed towards a vision of the future (in which “values” are always implicated). Stetsenko proceeds from the contention (after Vygotsky) that inner speech as generative of agency is not a uniquely interior (or individuated) phenomenon, whilst at the same time rejecting the notion that it is crudely determined by social conditions or “discourse”. If we accept this, we may consider reflexivity, if it is to be
thought of as a process which links thinking to acting, to be dependent upon the fact that humans are routinely and creatively intertwined with their social contexts and in some fundamental sense that their humanity can only be understood in these terms.

Stetsenko’s theorisation (2011) posits that a broadly “relational” ontology already operates across traditional disciplinary boundaries in many areas of research and scholarship; this ontological position is characterised by an underpinning assumption of co-determination of persons and social structures/contexts and we have discussed it already as characteristic of certain career development theories. It is the implicit, if not explicit, ontology upon which “central conflationist” approaches (in Archer’s terms) are based. However, it is dependent upon a fundamentally dualist position. Stetsenko argues for the necessity to move beyond a relational ontological position in which social practices are conceptualised in relation to “situatended” or “contribution” (akin to Archer’s critique of Giddens). So, for example, where we may conceptualise careers as developing at the intersection (or interface, in Watts’ terms) of the individual and society, such a conceptualisation fails to provide an explanation for the possibility of transformative change both at the level of individual careers and, at the level of society, through careers, which can account for agentic action as being both meaningfully individual and social.

Stetsenko’s alternative, which is based on earlier work on the constitution of “the self” (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004), itself based on Vygotsky’s explanations of the development of the mechanisms of inner speech, develops from the position that the world is always already changing as a result of complex, intertwined processes in which people/communities are bringing their world into being, whilst at the same time, creating/recreating themselves. Reality is understood to be “an arena of social practices, enacted through individually unique acts that, at the same time, are profoundly social” (Stetsenko, 2015, p. 108). Subjects are constituted and develop in and through engagement in social practices, but these practices are not a “fixed order” (as conceptualised in critical realism) or static, determining, social structures; they are themselves dynamic processes which are being created, recreated, changed and transformed by people on the basis of their intentions and their commitments. We spoke earlier of career actions being taken in the context of broader political actions – and all of these are intentional actions (even when not recognised as such) based on the commitments, and attempts to realise a particular future, of those acting. Epistemologically, the implications of this position are clear; knowing (in) the world is always motivated by transformative engagement, i.e. engagement in which we seek to bring that which we envision (and desire) into being (whether in routine or in apparently exceptional, or new, situations). The future (as the imagined endpoint) is always implicated in such a view. In this sense, the future is not waiting, nor does it simply unfold. Rather, it is created by our (necessarily social, because always mediated by tools, including language) actions in the present; even those which appear to be unexceptional, routine or private.

Stetsenko’s ontology challenges an existing social-theoretical paradigm in which knowledge is structured from a starting point in which persons and the world are implicitly, if not explicitly, separated. Where attempts are made to explain an apparent interrelationship, the individual becomes, if not exactly determined by that which already exists in social life, something akin to a hostage of social practices; able to contribute, but never described explicitly as a creator of something meaningfully new. There is also a danger that a-political neutrality creeps in to such conceptualisations. In moving from a relational ontology to a transformative activist stance, we shift the focus to the purposes, or ends, of purposeful activity, and consider fully the implications of humans’ future orientation. In so doing we can rely neither on an ontology in which humans learn who they are merely through contribution to that which exists, nor upon an ontology in which humans are separated in their very essence from social life, enabled or inhibited by the “genuinely interior” internal conversations.

Archer’s search for a “mechanism” through which individuals act upon structures to change them leads us onto the right road, but we become trapped in the cul-de-sac of modes of reflexivity because they cannot explain how our inner speech, or reflexive deliberation, leads routinely to
genuinely creative responses and actions in the world that are nevertheless always generated from the “stuff” of the social world. Furthermore, the outcomes of the deliberations of individuals, despite being routinely creative, require certain resources in order to be fully realised. We might all have the capacity to bring our visions of the future to fruition were the resources available to us; that we do not have equal access to those resources does not dilute the impetus for our action – we are continuously, and meaningfully creatively, bringing ourselves and the world into being. The critical contribution of Stetsenko’s work is in elaborating an ontology of persons and the world in which the mechanisms for this routine and inevitable creativity of persons is explained and in which the challenge is to seek to enable the possibility of its expression for all, equally. This leads us back to social justice and also, inevitably, to career, for career is not merely what we do in, or what we contribute to, the world. It is how the world is created – continuously brought into being.

**Conclusion**

Stetsenko’s ontological position, expressed as a “Transformative Activist Stance” provides a basis for the recognition of the ineluctably social nature of the universal human capacity for agency. It demands of us a clearer focus on the capacity of all persons to act upon the world to change it as they act to change their own world. Stetsenko posits that we are all, always, acting to bring into being an imagined future based upon our desires and commitments. The actions we take are always social even as they may seem, to clients, practitioners and scholars alike, to be operating at the level of the individual. However, despite the universal capacity for agency, resources for agency are unequally distributed. Practitioners understand that their clients’ agency is not unbounded, but they do not always work from an orientation that considers that clients’ career thinking and acting is literally making, and will make, the world. The politics of career is not only “out there” in the world, although it is also “out there” in the world. The world is always being brought into being through the exercise of power (the mobilisation of resources of various kinds) as agents work collaboratively (in Vygotskian terms), to bring a desired future into being. The impact of working from such an understanding and of considering more fully the ethico-political dimensions of agency and career as a basis for new models of practice, scholarship and research that address issues of social justice, requires significant further consideration in its own right and further work is needed to consider how these ideas articulate with existing frameworks for socially just practice.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Notes on contributor**

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**Data availability statement**

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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