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Praising the client in career guidance

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Abstract: In this article, we explore how praises directed at clients are used in Finnish career guidance encounters. More specifically, we examine how praise works as a tool for attending to the institutional agenda of career guidance. Our data set is a compilation of career and study guidance encounters within schools and universities, including 16 video-recorded and one audio-recorded career guidance sessions with 15 student-clients and 9 professionals. We use conversation analysis as an approach and method. Our analysis shows that the praises either focus on the client's strengths or their effort and skill in "doing career work". The praises occur in three contexts of performing institutional tasks of the encounters: 1. Mapping the client's situation, where praise is used in closing-relevant positions to "set aside" unproblematic issues; 2. Taking a stance on the client's strengths, where praise is offered to deliver professional views on the client's character, and to counter their self-deprecations; and, 3. Contributing to decision-making, where praise is used to topicalize the client's assets as cues to decision-making and to validate their interests. In general, the counsellors make efforts to show that their praise is grounded in the client's self-report.

Keywords: career guidance; career counselling; praise; positive assessment; counselling interaction; epistemics of praise

1 Introduction

Career guidance in the Nordic countries refers to a service that is a mandatory part of comprehensive, secondary, and higher education. In Finland in particular, career guidance is embedded in the curricula of these institutions and provided as group lessons and interventions as well as a service for individuals. Career guidance in Finland is also provided by labour market services, trade unions, and private

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businesses, but our focus in the present study is on career guidance provided by educational institutions.

Among various guidance and counselling occupations, career guidance is the most professionalized one in the Finnish context, with master's degree requirements, strong national steering from the Ministry of Education under the policies of lifelong guidance and national recommendations for ethical practice and competence requirements (Toni and Vuorinen 2020). The Finnish lifelong guidance system is internationally viewed as exceptional for its solid legislation, strategic leadership, cooperation, professionalization, and delivery. Diverse administrative sectors cooperate in developing guidance and counselling services, and educational institutions are committed to a lifelong guidance policy and target setting (Kettunen et al. 2023; Kettunen 2024).

Career guidance is directed at helping clients to deal with issues of study, career, educational, and work-related transitions, and life planning. This is done in a holistic and client-centered manner, addressing also psychosocial issues. In the Nordic context, “guidance” has been recently the chosen term, rather than “counselling”, to highlight the connections to pedagogical institutions and pedagogical theoretical frameworks, and to refer to the variety of ways of conducting guidance: not only in one-to-one consultations, but also in groups, classrooms, and communities, and connected to various activities such as work or hobbies (Hooley et al. 2018; Haug et al. 2020).

In the theoretical development of career guidance, the so-called matching approach, at the heart of the modern career theory (cf. Holland 1997) was criticized and replaced by postmodern approaches to career guidance and navigation of life's transitions. The postmodern approach, epitomized by the life design approach (Savickas et al. 2009) and constructivist counselling (Patton and McMahon 2017), emphasizes the socially constructed nature of topics of career guidance. This approach, widely supported and taught in Finland, is skeptical towards professional “diagnostics” of the individual. Therefore, assessments of the client in conversation tend not to be explicitly addressed in the prescriptive career guidance literature nor are they, to our knowledge, systematically addressed in Finnish career counselling training – as opposed to practices like questioning, advice giving or formulations.

The clients in career guidance are viewed as the authors of their own career stories. The meanings of these stories are seen as being constantly open for negotiation from different vantage points. Professionals are considered supporters of this work, “fellow travelers”, aiding their clients, but not telling clients what they should do, and especially not “who they are”. This way of portraying the professional-client relationship is recognized in many central career counselling approaches (Patton and McMahon 2017; Peavy 2000; Rogers 1961; Savickas et al. 2009). Another relevant point in this paradigmatic shift is the heightened attention given on career skills and aptitudes, i.e., career adaptability, both in theory and in practice (Savickas 2013), as

opposed to matching clients to vocations based on the professional's diagnostic opinion.

In practice, career guidance typically deals with clients' perceptions of themselves, their interests and strengths, and professionals participate in shaping these meanings. Thus, despite the skepticism in counselling theory towards diagnostic description of the client, there is a constant practical need in career guidance encounters for talking about the personality, character, and interests of the clients. In other words, they need to define "who the client is", for the practical purposes (Erickson and Shultz 1982). Career decisions are intertwined with institutional processes of selecting people to positions in society. Furthermore, clients themselves may define their career issues in terms of learning about the self, or "finding oneself". This is perhaps the reason for the blooming interest in the career guidance field for tools that generate representations on clients' motivations, strengths, characteristics, or interests – tools such as the Reiss Motivation Profile (Reiss 2004). The use of such psychological tools is generally not included in the training of career guidance professionals, but there is a market for such tools offered by the private sector.

It is therefore not surprising to find positive assessments about clients in career guidance interaction. This study provides a first understanding of how positive assessments are used in career guidance interactions.

In the following section, we locate our study in the tradition of conversation analytic research on guidance and counselling settings, and review conversation analytic literature on praise and its institutional uses. In Section 3, we present our data and the analytic procedure, after which we proceed to our analytic findings in Section 4. Our conclusions are discussed in the final section.

2 Literature review

Various forms of guidance, counselling and coaching have been in the radar of conversation analytic research (Stivers and Sidnell 2012) since the 1990s, for instance HIV and AIDS counselling (Peräkylä 1995) genetic counselling (Pilnick 2002; Lehtinen 2005), health promotion group counselling (Logren et al. 2019), coaching (Fleischacker and Graf 2024) and supervision of learning processes (Vehviläinen 2009a, 2009b, 2012). Career guidance, however, has received only scarce attention (cf. Vehviläinen 2001, 2003). Vehviläinen (1999) studied career guidance in labour market interventions in the 1990s. Her studies showed that the core project in such counselling encounters was to elicit personal experiential reports on interest or preferences from the client, and to connect them to advice for potential career steps and action plan items. This core project is apparent also in our current career guidance data.

Assessments are everywhere in our social activities: we constantly assess objects, people, places, and situations together with others as part of our social life and its practices. Thereby we maintain social solidarity and attachments to each other or separate ourselves from others. Assessments are turns of talk that evaluate persons, things or events, and as first position turns, they make relevant an agreement or disagreement response by the recipients (Pomerantz 1978, 1984). Agreement is typically treated as the preferred (expected and un-problematic) response.

In this paper we are interested in a specific type of assessments: positive assessments (praise) of the co-participant of interaction. In the literature on positive assessments of the co-participant, the terminology varies between compliments (Pomerantz 1978), praise (Etelämäki et al. 2015; Pillet-Shore 2012) and positive feedback (Weiste 2018). Etelämäki et al. (2015) discuss the potential ritualistic nature of praises in everyday situations, but they also point out that there are ways of showing that the compliments are sincere and occasioned. When people gather, praises form a way to construct sociability and mutual affiliation, for instance by complimenting food, location, and each other's appearances. In institutional settings, such praises may sometimes happen, too. They may be treated as off-agenda sociability, outside the actual institutional task (Vehviläinen 1999: 131). Here, however, we are interested in the way in which praises contribute to the very institutional tasks of career guidance.

In studies of everyday conversations in US English, positive assessments of the co-participant have been shown to be influenced by the preference organization in two ways, which are relevant for this study. Contrary to the general rule mentioned above, there is a preference for disagreement following other party's self-critical talk i.e., self-deprecations (Pomerantz 1984). There is also a dispreference for self-praise (Pomerantz 1978; Pillet-Shore 2015). Thus, praises involve contradictory constraints: preference for agreement in assessment adjacency pairs and dispreference of self-praise. (Keisanen and Kärkkäinen 2014; Pillet-Shore 2015; Pomerantz 1978). There are many ways to deal with this interactional bind, such as appreciation, scaled-down agreements or qualifications, response compliments, or focussing on some other aspect of the prior turn (Etelämäki et al. 2015; Pomerantz 1978).

In institutional settings, praise is used to perform specific institutional tasks. In learning settings, praises are a tool to reinforce the activity or performance that is sought for, for instance when praising a pupil for the correct answer to an exam question, thereby closing the sequence and moving along the agenda (McHoul 1978). Weiste (2018) discusses such reinforcing use of praise (or "positive feedback") when occupational therapists receive clients' descriptions of their progress. She points out that such use of praise performs relational work, when professionals show appreciation and convey positive affect to the client. Praises also occur in therapeutic

settings to empower clients by validating their reports of their progress in arriving at personal goals (Jager et al. 2015; Shaw and Kitzinger 2012). All these cases portray praise as practitioners' way of providing professional validation or confirmation on pupils' or clients' actions. As this type of praise is typically located in the third position, after an initiation by the professional and a response by the client, it is also a powerful tool to gear the interaction along the institutional agenda. As already stated, it has the dimension of relational work by building rapport.

This use of praise also runs the risk of overstepping the boundary set by clients' right to epistemic ownership of their experience. For instance, Weiste (2018) points out that clients in occupational therapy resist the positive feedback when it fails to take into account the client's own problem-indicative perspectives. Thus, we expect that praise requires a balancing effort on counsellors' part between exercising professional authority and orienting to the epistemic authority of clients.

There is a wealth of research on "the talking cure"; i.e., counselling, guidance, psychotherapy, and coaching, showing that in these settings, forms of professional influence are constrained by the overall goal of orienting to clients' epistemic authority. Professional intervention must be carried out in such a way that it is maintained that clients have authoritative knowledge of their own lives and selves (Peräkylä et al. 2008; Stukenbrock et al. 2021; Weiste and Peräkylä 2013; Weiste et al. 2016). Especially, guidance and counselling practices have been shown to contain balancing between professional influence and clients' own epistemic authority (Pilnick 2002; Vehviläinen 2003).

The topic of praise is new to the study of career guidance interaction. To our knowledge there is no published conversation analytic research on the matter (although see master's thesis by Ravantti 2023). Thus, we set out to find out how praises contribute to the institutional activity of guidance, and how the above-mentioned issue of epistemics is practically dealt with.

3 Data and method

Our data was collected in the context of special training for career guidance at the University of Eastern Finland. Special training degrees in Finland are research-based and work life-oriented training programs (30 ECTS) that are targeted in areas that undergo rapid change and expansion, and where there is urgent need for professionals with updated knowledge. Thus, the practitioners in the data, although in training, are typically experienced practitioners in some type of career guidance or other guidance, seeking further education and skills. The data is collected as part of a 5 ECTS module "Interaction in client encounters" and the participants perform analyses on their own conduct and view the material together as a group. We gathered

16 video recorded and one audio recorded career guidance sessions with 15 student-clients and 9 professionals, among them professional career counsellors and student advisors. Informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Our data set is a compilation of career and study guidance encounters within schools and universities.¹ Career guidance counsellors in Finland are trained to work in comprehensive schools as well as in secondary or higher education. The main activities in career guidance are similar in all these settings: discussing the client's or student's strengths and interests, concerns and problems, aiding them in decision-making and providing information and advice on potential directions. Two of the encounters were in English, and the rest of them were in Finnish. The Finnish cases were analyzed from the original data. As our analysis does not attend to grammatical details of the Finnish language, in the analysis we refer only to what is said in the translation. The original data extracts are presented in Appendix 1.

There is some variation in the data in terms of the phase of the process: most of the data come from the first (sometimes the only) encounter and the student/client has sought help from the service with a career issue. There are others where the process is more extensive, and the participants share a longer history (esp. secondary education settings), and in these cases the encounter may have been initiated by the professional, as a routine check-up.

Conversation analysis is used as our analytical approach. We view conversation analysis as both a theory of interaction and an approach and methodology for studying interaction as an orderly, turn-by-turn accomplishment of the participants. When applied in an institutional setting, it shows how the institutional encounters are co-constructed by the participants' turn-by-turn actions and how the institutional relevancies shape the interactional practices of the participants (Stivers and Sidnell 2012).

We first identify all praise-response sequences ($N = 25$) where the counsellor is praising the client, and the client responds. Roughly half of the sessions include such praise sequences. We then perform a detailed case-by-case analysis on this collection, using the following analytic questions:

- In which institutional activities do the praises of clients occur?
- How do clients respond to the praises?
- How is epistemic authority oriented to in these sequences?

It should be noted that as our focus is on the institutional activities that can be identified from the verbal actions, we pay attention to the embodied action only when it is relevant to our analytical argument. We acknowledge that this leaves out various aspects of what is happening in the interaction.

¹ The Finnish career guidance counsellor qualifies for working in both these fields.

4 Data analysis

Before focusing our analysis on the institutional uses of the praises, we examine what is being assessed in praises and find that the topical content of the praise falls into two categories. First, clients are praised for their “career adaptabilities”: their ability to consider, plan and execute activities that are relevant to career planning, or their ability to verbalize career issues and their own skills. For instance: *“you have found about these (=career options) very well.”* Second, praises address what might be considered “strengths”: characteristics or interests, such as *“just like you said (the fact) that you see different angles on things and that things are not so straightforward or black and white, that is a very important work life skill.”*

A great deal of the interaction in career guidance is dedicated to identifying these strengths or interests and establishing their connections to potential future activities and decisions (Vehviläinen 1999). This classification already reveals that praise seems tightly connected to the institutional tasks of career guidance. Indeed, the contexts for the praises in our analysis are all connected to key career guidance activities: (1) mapping the client’s situation ($N = 9$); (2) expressing a professional opinion the client’s strengths ($N = 13$); and (3) assisting in decision-making ($N = 3$). We now examine each of these contexts.

4.1 Mapping the client’s situation

This activity takes place in the initial stages of the encounters and in the first meetings, when the clients seek help for career issues. During this activity, the clients present their history and concerns, and the clients and the counsellors together establish what the “guidable” problem is. The clients narrate their situation typically with a reference to a concern or a problem. The counsellor receives these problems but usually do not proceed to advice-giving during the early stages of the interactions.

The following extract is from an encounter where the participants use English as their *lingua franca*. The client has been asked to narrate her job-seeking strategies and the counsellor comments on them from line 14 on, in the third position. (For transcription conventions, see Appendix 2).

Extract 1: **(#6) Career counselling, original in English**

01 CL: ...so (.) sometimes might be like when I- I was in
 02 hurry I just put something and then drop the cover
 03 letter but then I realized that I didn’t mention
 04 my desperation about this job that much so (.)

- 05 probably that could be one reason then I got rejected
 06 maybe for the job (1.0) probably because of course
 07 for one job there will be uh like (.) five
 08 hundred at least uh participant who willing
 09 to do that job so it's also difficult (1.0)
 10 uh for them to find out that who is the best
 11 and (.) whom they should require
 12 (1.0)
 13 CL: so in that case I don't know what to do and what
 14 will be the good or best approach to find
 15 the job.
 16 CO: okay
 17 CL: uh-huh
 18 CO: **I think you have kind of make a very good notion**
 19 **about your own acti[vity]**
 20 CL: [yeah]
 21 CO: **already that you have (.) you have recognized**
 22 **that in the cases where you haven't put so much**
 23 **effort on the application**
 24 CL: mm,
 25 CO: **the response from the (1.0) company**
 26 CL: [mm],
 27 CO: **[has] not been as good as (.) in the- some other**
 28 **cases where you have worked**
 29 CL: uh-huh.
 30 CO: **more,**
 31 CL: uh-huh.
 32 CO: **uh for the applica[tion] letter**
 33 CL: [uh-huh]
 34 CO: um (1.0) could you open up a little bit uh oh
 35 about how you (.) process the (.) when you get
 36 CL: [uh-huh]
 37 CO: [get] an applica- uh open job ...

Here, the client explains her job-hunting strategies, concluding that she has a problem knowing how to make herself stand out among other applicants. The counsellor acknowledges her turn with “okay.” Instead of tackling the problem at this point by giving advice, the counsellor provides a positive evaluation in the third position, praising the client's self-critical observations and spelling out the exact content of these observations. The counsellor begins her turn with “*I think*” (line 18),

which can be heard as indicating epistemic independence in assessing the client: the counsellor presents her assessment as based on her own (professional) knowledge. Furthermore, the counsellor presents evidence for her assessment by formulating what the client has told (lines 21–23, 25, 27–28, 30, 32). In these ways, the counsellor displays her epistemic rights to assess something that belongs to the client's personal domain.

This praise accomplishes several things. The client is shown appreciation after her trouble description, but the trouble is not treated at this point as an “advisable” one. By praising the client for self-critical observations, the counsellor also manages to align with the self-critical content. Furthermore, this is a way to imply that such observations on self are worthy “skills.” After praising the client for successful self-critical analysis, the counsellor proceeds to examine another aspect of the clients' job-hunting strategies, thereby proceeding to a potential solution.

Here is a further example, also in English as lingua franca. In this case, the praise does not immediately follow the client's self-critical talk but occurs in a summary that the counsellor provides before moving along the agenda.

Extract 2: **(#9) /Career counselling, original in English**

- 01 CO: ...get by with English everywhere (.) but then
 02 when you start looking for work (.) you hit
 03 the Finnish firewall ((laughs))
 03 CL: yeah
 04 CO: and uh it's not (.) that it's you know
 05 all-encompassing that are that you can't
 06 penetrate the wall but it's there
 07 (.)
 08 CL: yeah
 09 CO: and and that's something where the- the kind
 10 of the bubble
 11 (1.0)
 12 CL: [yeah]
 13 CO: [is a] part of the problem a little bit
 14 because then you're
 15 CL: [yeah]
 16 CO: [not] you know forcing yourself to learn but
 17 that's something that you need to think about
 18 how much you can and want to invest
 19 in (.) in that in that (.)
 20 CO: **well I think that that really (.) what it sounds**
 21 **to me like you already have two interviews**

- 22 CL: yeah
 23 C0: **I think your CV is okay** (.) so it's really (1.0)
 24 I don't know mu- what what is there something
 25 that you're most concerned or is there
 20 something that (.) you just (1) you-you're having
 21 questions about?

In the above extract, the counsellor talks about the importance of having a command of the Finnish language in trying to become employed and ends his comment with a piece of advice. Then the counsellor moves to provide a summarizing, list-shaping turn (lines 20–21, 23), where he reaches out to the earlier conversation. It has been established that the client has already been called to two job interviews, which is considered successful. This way the counsellor builds epistemic grounds for his assessment, based on what the client has told. The counsellor then adds that the client's CV is “okay” (line 23). “Okay” is not a strong positive evaluation, but it works here to show that the CV has no problems and thus it is not pursuable as a potentially problematic issue at this point. Both items are introduced with “I think” (line 23) or “what it sounds to me” (line 20), indicating epistemic independence of the assessment. These two “items” are thereby marked as positive ones, and the counsellor proceeds to a conclusion (“so it's really-”, line 23), which he then redirects after a pause to ask a question that elicits potential other concerns from the client.

In sum, praises in this type of context – mapping the client's situation – function as parts of closings, highlighting aspects of the client's reported activities that are portrayed as successful, skilful, or otherwise worthy. These aspects are, thus, portrayed as neither problem-relevant nor pursuable, and they are “set aside” in favour of moving along to other potential concerns. These praises target career adaptabilities, and thus they also function as reinforcement of positive performance or skill. By praising, the counsellors demonstrate to the clients that they already have done something well and that these things can be appreciated as skills.

The fact that these praises typically occur in a closing position and right before attending to another, potentially problem-relevant topic seems to indicate that they are not offered as “heavy-duty” interventions, but rather as “footnotes.” The clients, indeed, respond to these praises accordingly: they offer minimal response tokens, nods and smiles, or at times with no observable response, as in Extract 2 (line 23).²

² There is one exception, where such a “footnote” is repeatedly topicalised so that eventually it turns out to be the central message that the counsellor emphasizes.

4.2 Taking a professional stance to the client's strengths

Another type of environment for praise is a situation where there has been some exploration, and the client has had a chance to expand on their problem description. At some point, the counsellor takes a stance on what to treat as the core issue and responds to it. The gist of the praise is to reformulate something problematic into something positive. The praise is offered as the conclusive professional opinion concerning the client's situation.

This kind of response may be delivered as a response to a larger stretch of talk, rather than as an immediate 3rd position response as in Extract 1. Extract 3 is an instance of praise in its entirety; therefore, we have not used bold type face here.

Extract 3: **(#1) Career counselling, translated from Finnish, see Appendix 1 for original**

- 01 CO: I hear that you talk a lot about this kind of
 02 (.) it could be described as generalist
 03 expertise (.) that you have.
 04 CL: Yes.
 05 CO: So (.) I mean at the unive[rsity] especially (.)
 06 CL: [yes]
 07 CO: in a natural science field so (.) there are
 08 many specialists. And it could be
 09 [that] that it
 10 CL: [mm.]
 11 CO: sort of- (.) also there on [[mentions discipline]]
 12 side there are these specialist paths (.)
 13 that one should perhaps [have] chosen maybe
 14 CL: [yes.]
 15 CO: and there's difficulty in choosing like (.) like
 16 "where would I fit now".
 17 CL: [yes.]
 18 CO: [so that] (.) that sort of generalism (.)
 19 is more like your strength area. and (.) and
 20 CL: yes.
 21 CO: connecting big entities as you said (.) so like
 22 in a way (.) you have found your niche as you
 23 said so (.) and it shows in your
 24 study [success]
 25 CL: [app- app(h)arently
 26 CL: yes

- 27 CL: [Yes. and-]
 28 CO: [yes. and] and it is (.) actually one
 29 type of expertise (.)the generalistic (.)
 30 expertise and [generalism.]
 31 CL: [Hooray. ((laughter))]
 32 CO: yes. so there is no need to be sort of
 33 (.) worried whether I am somehow sufficient and
 34 (.) and you know (.) I mean it is really really
 35 really important and (.) sort of important (.)
 36 future skill also.
 37 CO: So you clearly have the ability (.)
 38 to picture (.) this thing (1.0) sort of like
 39 how to approach (.) this issue (.) whether it is
 40 through culture or through food or (.) or this kind of
 41 [big] themes.
 42 CL: [mm.]
 43 CO: and (.) and so- sort of (.) to be able to explain
 44 things to people.
 45 (2.0)
 46 CL: [yes.]
 47 CO: [even] difficult things such as what is
 48 going on with this climate change, how it
 49 connects to [food] production or (.) so (.)
 50 CL: [yes]
 51 that kind of skills are (.) are the ones that
 52 will be very much needed in the future.
 53 (2.0)
 54 CO: so so [in that way] (1.0) you have
 55 CL: [yes.]
 56 CO: [picked the righ-
 57 CL: [yeah well I have tried telling myself that
 58 too, like “it will be okay”...

The counsellor here provides an extended praise after a longer monologue from the client. It is a reformulation of what the client has portrayed as her scattered (and thereby problematic) career interest, and it is presented with a professional term, *generalist expertise*. At this point, the counsellor shows that she has accepted the client's concern as a “workable” one. The client's active upgraded portrayal of her situation as troublesome calls for attention on the counsellor's part. Instead of advice, the counsellor counters the nature of the client's presenting issue by praise.

In line 1 the counsellor begins her assessment with “I hear”, which again indicates epistemic independency; the assessment is offered as based on the counsellor’s own professional knowledge. The counsellor first mentions that, in the client’s field, it is easy to feel like one should have picked a speciality, thereby normalizing (Svinhufvud et al. 2017) her feelings of inadequacy (lines 5, 7–8, 11–13, 15–16). She then goes on to reformulate the client’s orientation as that of a “generalist,” presenting it as an asset. Furthermore, whereas the client has portrayed herself as having troubles in her progress, the counsellor contends that she has “found her niche” (line 22) and recycles the client’s earlier mention of her grades having got better after changing her major. The counsellor formulates the client’s orientation in professional terms, as a revelation of a professional fact (lines 1, 18). Again, like in previous examples, the counsellor does interactional work to ground her assessment to what she has heard the client saying earlier.

The client receives this information with a laughing “*hooray*” (line 31) that indicates having received newsworthy, welcome information. This could also be heard as a sardonic response, and the counsellor continues to more clearly reassure that the client’s worries are unwarranted. She then continues to elaborate by characterizing the client’s generalist abilities, stating that they will be relevant in the future.

This is a very elaborate and markedly presented professional opinion that counters the client’s negative opinion of herself and portrays a positive future. The counsellor presents a professional term (*generalism*) and gives it concrete detail. She invokes her authority by reference to professional categories (“it is actually one type of expertise”, line 23) but also maintains close connection to the client’s own story and its details.

The client is responding with minimal acknowledgements (translated as “yes”, lines 4, 17, 20, 26, 46 (see the appendix for original Finnish responses); on line 27 the client projects continuation in overlap with the counsellor but abandons her turn). A two-second pause ensues (line 53) after which the counsellor provides a conclusion: the client is portrayed as having picked the right path. The conclusion is left incomplete (line 56) as the client comes in with a response that seems to be dealing with the counsellor’s entire intervention (lines 57–58). The client shows that she accepts the professional opinion and portrays herself as having aligned with that, while also not doing completely overt agreement. Thus, she manages to avoid completely agreeing with a heavy praise of herself. Also, she maintains a certain consistency with her earlier story: she does not have to treat her negative story as “wrong” when she says that while worrying, she also kept believing in a more positive scenario. The participants continue along these lines for quite a while – the counsellor praising the client and her promising skills and reformulating her trouble-items into assets, and the client shyly accepting the praises.

In sum, praises occur in moments where the mapping of the client's situation has been completed, and the counsellor is ready to take a professional stance on the client's issue. This reaction takes the form of praise. The issues that the client presents as problematic are reshaped into something favourable and described using professional terminology. The path for advice-giving is also paved, but it is now based on this new framing.

4.3 Contributing to decision-making in a planning sequence

In the final category, the examples show how the counsellor uses praise to contribute to sequences where the students are engaged in discussing their career-related decisions. Instead of responding to any problem descriptions of the student, the counsellor initiates a planning sequence (Vehviläinen 1999) to help decide which tests to take in the matriculation examination.

The next example is from a high school career guidance counselling session. The counsellor has invited the student as a routine for all second-year students. After a brief discussion on the student's well-being, the counsellor has shifted the talk to the main issue, i.e., which subjects the student would include in the matriculation examination. The counsellor leads the talk towards looking at the student's strengths as clues to the decision-making.

Extract 4: **(#8) High school, study counsellor & student, translated from Finnish, see Appendix 1 for original**

- 01 CO: ...but we could start sort of with the “strengths”
 02 side of things
 03 (1.0)
 04 CO: what do you like and what has gone well (.) so
 05 sometimes the plan is found that way

Following this, the student discloses that the obligatory subjects have not gone that well for her. They have a long discussion on math and languages, then for a while the talk trails off to another topic. Then the counsellor directs the talk back to the main topic and she directs her attention to the computer where she begins to screen the student's course grades.

Extract 5: **(#8) High school, study counsellor & student, translated from Finnish, see Appendix 1 for original**

- 01 CO: ((gazing computer) let's see (.) how the studies
 02 have been adding up and (1.0) if there are any
 03 any sort of clues that I could ask about.

- 04 ST: yeah.
 05 (1.0)
 06 CO: **mother tongues (=mother tongue courses)**
 07 **have gone really well for you?**
 08 ST: yeah?
 09 CO: **and in English after all (.) everything has**
 10 **been nicely passed [apparently?]**
 11 ST: [yes it has] in the sense
 12 that I haven't needed to do them again
 13 but£...

During this screening of the student's performance, the praise on lines 6–7 is offered as a straightforward statement. The epistemic environment is here different to the ones shown in examples 1 and 3, as the grades are directly available to the counsellor on her computer. The grade itself testifies for *“going really well.”* The second assessment (lines 9–10) is more complex: there are qualifiers, and the praise is targeted at having passed courses instead of having done well in them. The added *“apparently”* (line 10) shapes the turn more pointedly into a “my side telling” (Pomerantz 1980) and prompts the student to elaborate. She tentatively agrees with a partial agreement (*“yes it has in the sense that...”*) and smiles towards the end of the turn (line 12) – the passing has perhaps not been so easy.

In this session, the student does not yet make definite decisions about which subjects to include in her matriculation examination. The praise is offered here to contribute to a conversation that portrays her situation with the obligatory subjects (mother tongue, math, languages), and where she has raised the issue of having potential problems with foreign languages. The praise contributes to weighing her prospects.

The following example is from the same session. There is a short discussion on a dream job in the middle of the matriculation exam topic. The counsellor uses praise to validate and thereby confirm the choices the student describes. Such a use of praise has been identified by Ravantti (2023). Prior to the excerpt, the counsellor has suggested summer university courses to prep up the weaker subjects, but the student has declined because she intends to work in the summer. She has then mentioned her career dream and reported her knowledge about her options.

Extract 6: **(#8) High school, study counsellor & student, translated from Finnish, see Appendix 1 for original**

- 01 ST: ... so (.) I have been thinking about that (.)
 02 quite a bit (.) [because] it
 03 CO: [yes.]

- 04 ST: interests me.
 05 CO: **well but you have already found out about**
 06 **these quite well.**
 07 (-) are there sort of (.) professional things
 08 that you think would (.) make you really good
 09 for this type of jobs.
 10 (1.0)
 11 ST: ((laughter)) I haven't really thought about
 12 it but (1.0) mhm
 13 they interest me a great deal (.)
 14 [so] that is what sort of carries it forward.
 15 CO: [yes.]
 16 CO: yes.
 17 ST: but (1.0) mhm well maybe since (.) one is
 18 working with people there all the time any[way]
 19 CO: [yes]
 20 ST: (.) so that feels like (.) really like
 21 my own (=like my own thing).
 22 CO: yes.
 23 ST: like natural.
 24 CO: (-) too and (.) **I really have got a very (.)**
 25 **very sympathetic impression of you in the past years?**
 26 ST: yes.
 27 CO: **and (.) just the way you for example take others**
 28 **into consideration or how you make the effort to**
 29 **be polite even when**
 30 ST: frightf
 31 CO: **the queue is long and you know so (.)**
 32 **such things are (.) are really important.**
 33 ST: [yes.]
 34 CO: **[even] the (.) even the smile (.) (-)**
 35 **for example in the middle of a customer's day.**
 36 (2.0)
 37 CO: well the extensive math course will guarantee
 38 that you don't need to take the extensive
 39 language exam? ...

On lines 5–6, there is the first praise, much like the ones in Extracts 1 and 2; it is closing relevant and offered right before moving to a new question (lines 7–9). The student is praised for her career adaptabilities. The second praise, which is at focus

here, is offered in responsive position, but instead of dealing with self-critical talk, it validates positive claims that the student has presented of herself. The student is asked to nominate strengths that would make her suitable for her chosen career. Here, like what we saw in the Extracts 1–3, the counsellor does epistemic work to present the assessment as based on her own reasoning (lines 24–25) and as grounded in evidence (lines 27–28, 31).

The student responds first with an account of not having really considered this, but then goes on to say that it is the strong interest that she feels that drives her career planning, and that working with people feels very natural for her. The counsellor immediately comes in with an assessment where she agrees with the student and offers evidence based on having observed her for several years at school and also in her job activities.

In sum, this type of praise is not responsive to problem descriptions of the student. It is rather a way to contribute to a shared activity of planning the student's future activity. Praise is a way of identifying potential cues to strengths.

5 Conclusions

As our analysis demonstrates, praise is part and parcel of career guidance interaction. It is embedded in the key tasks of the counsellor: to expose and foster the client's "career adaptabilities", i.e., skills and motivations to do "career work", and to articulate and reinforce strengths that could point to potential career directions or decisions.

Firstly, praise is used when mapping the client's situation and trying to identify what the "guidable" concern is. Praise identifies issues that the client has done well and are, therefore, not pursued at that moment. Praise is located in the third position, right before moving on to exploring another issue. Such praise also conveys that the client already has some career skills. Secondly, praise is used in moments where the counsellor has mapped the situation and is tackling the client's issue. Praise is used to convey a professional evaluation of the client's strengths, and it counters the client's self-critical opinions. Such praise formulates the client's situation in professional terms and paves the way for potential advice that can be built on this understanding. It may also validate the client's positive self-evaluation. Thirdly, praise is used to topicalize the client's or the student's strengths or successes as cues for decision-making. Rather than reacting to any self-reports by the client, these praises are brought up in the first position, and they refer to materials that are available to the counsellor independent of the student's reports.

These uses of praise have not been identified in earlier research, and they show that praise is used in career guidance as a way to teach the client about their career

planning and about their own strengths. As Weiste (2018) points out, when discussing positive feedback in occupational therapy, praise is a way of building rapport and supporting the positive face of the other. This relational aspect has not been the central focus in this article, but we have discussed it elsewhere based on these data (Voutilainen and Vehviläinen 2025).

Our findings confirm that praises often occur in environments where the clients have presented problems or self-deprecations (see also Voutilainen and Vehviläinen 2025). Thus, the praise is often responsive to self-critical talk by the clients. However, there are also cases where this does not apply (see Extract 5). Praises are located in both responsive and forward-reaching positions, as observed by Ravantti (2023).

The counsellors in our data at times invoke the professional voice to comment on their clients' skills and assets and present factual statements about life of work and study and their requirements. In such cases, accounts and details are offered for the client, as well as references to their own earlier descriptions. However, even in the praises that are offered more in passing (Extracts 1 and 2) the counsellors often show some orientation to being accountable for what they ground the praise on. Peräkylä (1998) has discussed the way doctors, in giving the diagnostic observations to their patients, orient to both their professional authority and their accountability to make their observations available to the client. Something similar happens also with the praises in our data. The praises are, of course, not "diagnoses" as such, but they have a diagnostic nature. They are something the clients may take away with them and use as cues to their career reflections and decision-making. In our data, we can also see that occasionally the counsellors do not explain their observations, for instance "*Mother tongues have gone really well for you*" or "*Your CV is okay*". This variation is due to the local activity-related environment of the turn, but this may also be something that varies between counsellors and their skills. At least, following the theoretical underpinning of career guidance mentioned earlier, the counsellor would be accountable for being as transparent as possible.

Based on our findings, the epistemics of the praise sequences in career guidance point in two directions. First, in career services directed at adult clients, the counsellors' praises are shown to be based on the clients' self-reports, and the counsellors orient to their accountability for explicating the grounds for their praises. This is a key orientation in types of guidance in general, to show that the professional's interventions and professional opinions are grounded in the shared interaction and the clients' own perspectives. This is obviously relevant in situations where the client and the counsellor have only just met, and the counsellor has scarce knowledge about the client. In our third category, however, the situation is somewhat different. Grades are available in guidance as unproblematic resources for indicating strengths or assets. Also a CV may be treated as a resource that "speaks for itself" and is open to the counsellor's assessment without the client's own reports.

Above, we have suggested that some praises are dealt with in passing, while some are offered as “heavier” professional interventions. The clients also orient to this difference in their responses. In the first and the third categories, the praises are received in passing, whereas in the second category, the clients must deal with the praise. In their responses, the clients balance between aligning with the professional opinion and showing they do not overtly agree with praises of themselves.

Our study offers a critical empirical comment on postmodern career guidance theories by showing that in the actual practice of career guidance, the clients are recurrently assessed by the counsellors, and that the assessment have a practical function in managing the agenda of the encounter. In this paper we have focused on positive assessments, which are obviously more common than negative or ambivalent assessments. Future studies could pay attention to how assessments in general function in career guidance and counselling, for example in the school context where institutional aims of the encounter may lead to addressing also something problematic in the client’s or student’s performance. Assessments provide a window to the diagnostic aspects of career guidance and there is more to be explored.

Appendix 1: Original Finnish transcripts

Extract 3:

01 OH: mä kuulen et sä puhut aika paljon siitä semmosesta
 02 (1.0) sitä vois kuvata semmoseks generalistiseks
 03 osaamiseksi mitä (.) mitä on.
 04 AS: joo.
 05 OH: et (.) et yliopis[tossa] varsinki (.) tällä
 06 AS: [kyllä.]
 07 OH: tämmösellä l- luonnontieteen puolella ni (.) on
 08 paljon spesialisteja. ja voi
 09 olla [että] (.) et se
 10 AS: [mm.]
 11 OH: niinku (.) siellä ((oppiaineen)) puolellakin on
 12 niinku semmosia spe- (.) spesialistilinjoja
 13 (.) joista olisi pitänyt [niinku] ehkä valita
 14 AS: [kyllä.]
 15 OH: ja se valinnanvaikeus et et onks (.) o- o-
 16 mihin mä nyt oikeesti sopisin.
 17 AS: [joo.]
 18 OH: [ni se] (.) se niinku se generalistinen (.)
 19 on enemmän se sun vahvuusalue. ja (.) ja
 20 AS: kyllä.

- 21 OH: isojen kokonaisuuksien yhdisteleminen niin
 22 ku sä sanoit että (.) et et tavallaan (.) sä oot
 23 löytäny sen oikeen paikkas niin ku kuvasit
 24 että (.) ja se opi- näkyy siel opintomenes[tyksessä.]
 25 AS: [ilme- ilmeisesti
 26 ((naurahtaa))]
 27 OH: kyllä.
 28 AS: [joo. ja-]
 29 OH: [joo. ja] ja se on (.) ihan yksi
 30 asiantuntijuuden laji (.)se generalisti(.)nen
 31 osaaminen ja [generalismi.]
 32 AS: [huraa. ((naurahtaa))]
 33 OH: kyllä. et ei tarvi olla yhtään niinku jotenki
 34 (.) huolissaan että oonko mä nyt jotenki riittävä
 35 ja (.) ja näin että (.) et se on tosi tosi tosi
 36 tärkeä ja (.) tulevaisuuden semmonen (.) yks niinku
 37 tärkeä taito myöskin. et et sul on selkeesti
 38 kyky (.) hahmottaa (.) sitä että (1.0) tavallaan
 39 että mi- mistä kulmasta voisi saada (.) jotenkin
 40 niinku kiinni että (.) et onks se sitte kulttuurin
 41 kautta tai ruuan tai (.) tai tämmösten
 42 niinku [iso]jen teemojen.
 43 AS: [mm.]
 44 OH: ja (.) ja ta- tavallaan sitte (.) pystyy
 45 selittämään asioita ihmisille.
 46 (2.0)
 47 AS: [joo.]
 40 OH: [vai]keitakin niinku et tavallaan m-mitä
 41 tässä ilmastonmuutokses on kyse. miten se
 42 liittyy [ruuan]tuotantoon vaikka ni (.) niin (.) ni
 42 AS: [joo.]
 43 OH: semmoset taidot on (.) on niit semmosii
 44 taitoi mitä tulevaisuudes tosi paljon tarvitaan.
 45 (2.0)
 46 OH: et et [sikäli](1.0) olet olet juurikin
 47 AS: [joo.]
 48 niinku [valinnut oike-
 49 AS: [joo sitä mä oon yrittäny] ittelleki aina
 50 vaan sillee niinku kyl se siitä kyl se siitä että (.)

- Extract 4: 01 OH: mut tota me voitais alottaa vähän niin ku
02 siitä vahvuudet-puolesta että
03 (1.0)
04 OH: mistä sä tykkäät ja mikä on sujunu hyvin (.)
05 ni joskus se kirjoitus suunnitelma löytyy ihan
06 sitäki kautta
- Extract 5: 01 OH: kattotaan vähän (.) miten ne opinnot on kertyny
02 ja (1.0) onko siellä jotain ikään ku semmosia
03 punasia lankoja (mist mä vähän kysäsisin).
04 OP: joo.
05 (1.0)
06 OH: äikät on menny sulla tosi kivasti?
07 OP: joo?
08 OH: ja enkusta on kuitenkin (.) kaikki menny
09 ihan mukavasti läpi
10 [ilmeisesti?]
11 OP: [joo se on] sillai ettei foo tarttenu uusia mutta
- Extract 6: 01 OP: että (.) sitä mä oon niinku miettiny (.)
02 aika paljo (.) [koska] se
03 OH: [joo.]
04 OP: kiinnostais.
05 OH: no mut sä oot hyvin ottanu näistä jo selvää.
06 OH: (-) onko semmosia tota (.) asioita ammatillisesti
07 mitä aattelet että (.) ne tekee susta tosi hyvän
08 just täntyyppisiin tehtäviin.
09 (1.0)
10 OP: ((naurahtaa)) en kauheesti oo kyllä miettiny mutta
11 (1.0) mm (1.0) ne kiinnostaa tosi paljon (.)
12 [että] se on niinku se että mikä vie
13 OH: [joo.]
14 OP: eteenpäin.
15 OH: joo.
16 OP: mutta (1.0) mm no ehkä ku siinä (.) koko aika
17 ihmisten kanssa työskennellään
18 kummin[ki] (.) niin se tuntuu (.) tosi omalta
19 OH: [joo.]
20 OH: joo.
21 OP: semmoselta luonteelta.
22 OH: (-) kans ja (.) oon saanu susta kyllä tosi

- 23 (.) tosi sympaattisen vaikutelman tässä
 24 vuosien varrella?
 25 OP: joo.
 26 OH: ja tota (.) just se miten esimerkiksi sä otat
 27 muut huomioon tai miten sä jaksat olla
 28 kohtelias sillonki ku
 29 OP: faivanf
 30 OH: jono on jo pitkä ja muuta ni (.) semmoset asiat
 31 on (.) on hirveen tärkeitä.
 32 OP: [joo.]
 33 OH: [ihan] se (.) ihan se hymykin (.) (-) siellä
 34 esimerkiksi vaikka asiakkaan päivän keskellä.
 35 (2.0)
 36 OH: tota se pitkä matikka takaa sen et sun ei
 37 välttämättä tarvis kirjoittaa kieltä pitkänä?

Appendix 2

Transcription symbols

Transcription symbols (Jefferson 2004)

CO:	Speaker identification: counsellor (CO), client (CL)
[]	Overlapping talk
(.)	A pause of less than 0.2 seconds
(1.0)	Pause: silence measured in seconds and tenths of a second
.hh	An in breath
hh	An out breath
mt, krhm	Vocal noises
@word@	Spoken in an animated voice
((word))	Transcriber's comments
(...)	Transcriber could not hear what was said
<u>word</u>	Accented sound or syllable
-	Abrupt cut-off of preceding sound
,	Final level intonation
.	Final falling intonation
?	Final rise intonation

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