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Career Development Theory: an Integrated Analysis

Abstract

Career theories are developed to help us make sense of the complexity of career choice and development. The intricacy of the subject matter is such that career theories most often focus on one or two aspects of the phenomenon. As such the challenges of integrating the theories with each other, and integrating them within career practice, are not insignificant. In this chapter, I offer an overview of the theoretical landscape which illustrates how the theories align with each other to build up a comprehensive picture of career choice and development. The chapter will introduce a wide range of theoretical frameworks, spanning seven decades and numerous academic disciplines, and will discuss the most well-known theorists alongside less familiar names. The chapter will be structured around four concepts: identity, environment, career learning, and psychological career resources, and suggestions are offered for the incorporation of theories in career practice.

Keywords: career theory; career development; career identity; career learning; career environment; psychological career resources

Introduction

Career development is complex. The choices people make and the paths they carve out for themselves are influenced by psychological, sociological, geographical, historical, political, physical, economic, and educational factors (Gunz, 2009). Career theories are devised to simplify these complexities. Their purpose is to reduce complex career behaviours into concepts which are easier to understand (Young, Marshall & Valach, 2007), and the more complex the particular phenomenon, the more vital it is to develop theories which help us to understand it. Yet making sense of the theories themselves is no mean feat. A consequence of the multi-faceted diversity of the subject is that, whilst the body of career development

literature as a whole addresses the full range of influences on career development, individual theories tend to focus on one or two aspects alone, leading to the 'segmented and disparate nature' of the academic arena (Patton & McMahon, 2014 p.147). Compounding the challenge of reintegrating theories which focus on diverse aspects of career development, are the different philosophical traditions which underpin the theories.

Career theories from the early to mid-part of the 20th century were strongly influenced by positivist epistemology, which assumes a single objective truth. Career development scholarship aimed to expose facts about the world of work and offer advice as to how individuals should best situate themselves within it (Bassott, 2012). Moving forwards to the 21st century, we see that many contemporary career theories are influenced by constructivism, which holds that reality is constructed by the individual, from their unique personal perspective, based on their interactions with the world around them (Young & Collin, 2004). Contemporary theorists can be critical of the more traditional positivist approaches suggesting that those theories do not reflect the realities of people engaging in the labour market in the 21st century, and as such are not fit for purpose.

These distinctions between philosophies and disciplines have influenced the way that career writers introduce the theoretical perspectives. A common approach to describing career theories (for example, Kidd, 2008; OCR, 2018; Sharf, 2013; Walsh & Osipow, 2014) is to focus on clusters of theories, grouping the theories chronologically. Whilst this approach might provide a useful historical overview, there is a limitation with the implicit or explicit invitation to espouse the more recent theories and reject the older ones. Collin (2009, p.3) stresses that 'the richness, complexity and ambiguity [of career development] cannot be grasped from one perspective alone' and a wholesale rejection of the less fashionable theories could leave readers with a limited and partisan understanding of the field.

In this chapter, I take a different approach. The epistemological position which most closely fits the approach to career development theory in this chapter, is that of pragmatism (Dewey, 1933; Rorty, 1999). The starting point for pragmatism is not 'what is my worldview' but 'what problem do I want to solve'. Approaches are judged by the actions they lead to rather than the philosophical position from which they start (Smith, 1999). A theory should be judged on the basis of its relevance and value, and we should accept that different approaches will be needed to solve different problems (Richardson, Constantine, & Washburn, 2005). An integrated approach which conceptualises career development theories as elements of a holistic landscape, and which highlights synergies and strengths of theories will offer an accessible synthesis. A framework which draws on many different theories will facilitate practitioners as they identify the individual theory which is most appropriate for any given context.

This chapter then aims to offer an integrated overview of career theories, interpreting them in terms of themes, rather than chronology, discipline or epistemology. This synthesis of career theory benefits students and practitioners in that it does not force a choice between one theory and another and instead tries to bring theories together, highlighting similarities rather than differences. This approach demonstrates that the theories can combine to help to explain more about a client's career story than any one theory on its own could.

The theories chosen are, arguably, the most influential career theories of the moment, and this chapter will highlight the positive contributions they can make to our understanding and our practice. But it should be noted that these theories are not without their flaws. Most of the career literature is Western, written in English and assumes an individualistic culture. It presupposes that people have a choice and want to use their careers as a means of achieving self-actualisation, and whilst many of theories acknowledge the complexity of the influences on career, the body of literature as a whole has been criticised for its tacit support of the

neoliberal agenda, emphasising individual agency at the expense of structural change (McMahon & Arthur, 2019).

To some degree, the integrated model presented below addresses these criticisms. This approach highlights not only the range of influences, but also the interactions between influences, acknowledging the interdependence between agency and structure. The model also explicitly contests the notion that career development is individualistic and middle class, and it incorporates theories which look at the experiences of many types of people living their lives and negotiating their careers in a range of different contexts.

A thematic overview of career theories

In the text that follows, I offer a thematic analysis of 40 career theories, drawn from a range of countries, disciplines, epistemologies, and decades. The theories are grouped together based on their central concepts and the resulting framework consists of four themes: identity, environment, career learning, and psychological career resources. I describe the four elements discretely in this chapter, but of course, in reality, they are not wholly separate, either conceptually or chronologically. The elements interweave and develop concurrently rather than sequentially, and a single theory might fit within more than one theme. We start then with an exploration of the idea of *identity,* the role it fulfils in career development and the position it holds in career theories.

Identity

Identity is a psycho-social construct which tells people 'who they are and who they could become' (McMahon & Patton, 2014, p.277) and it lies at the heart of many traditional and contemporary career development theories. Identity, as it relates to career development, includes aspects of an individual's background, their demographic and personal characteristics, what matters to them, and how they fit in to their society.

The idea of identity has been interpreted in different ways. Conceptualised as an object, the self can be observed, tested, and measured (Savickas, 2011). This understanding of the self is central to the influential *person-environment fit* approaches which assume that workers are more satisfied and more effective in jobs whose principle characteristics reflect their interests, values and skills. Key examples of this approach are Holland's *theory of vocational personalities* (1997) and Dawis and Loftquist's *theory of work adjustment* (1984), which acknowledges that workers can both change their environments and adjust to them.

A second tranche of theories acknowledge the self in a more subjective way, focusing on the ever-changing nature of the individual. These theories hold that individuals are in control of and responsible for their own personal development. Super's *life span life space model* (1990), for example, suggests that people fulfil different roles throughout their lives which play out in different contexts, and Mainiero and Sullivan's *kaleidoscope career model* (2005) explores the changing drivers of men and women throughout their working lives. Arthur and Rousseau's boundaryless career model (1996) examines the relationship between the individual and the organisation, and highlights the role of psychological and physical flexibility in career paths.

In recent years, a group of theorists have conceptualised the self as social and inextricably linked to context. The self, as defined in theories of this genre, is both conceptualised and constructed by the individual: people make their own meanings from their experiences, working out who they are by creating narratives, or telling stories about themselves, which account for their interactions with their environments. This version of the self is core to the contemporary constructionist understanding of career, and takes centre stage in Ibarra's work on identity and narrative (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) and Savickas et al.'s (2009) influential theory of *life design* which conceptualises the self as constructed, holistic, and fluid.

Identity too can be future oriented, informing goals and aspirations. *Possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1996) are concerned with different versions of ourselves in various hypothetical futures. These possible selves can be positive or negative, realistic or fantastical, and they have been shown to have an impact on career goals and motivation (Strauss, Griffin & Parker, 2012), and have been used to understand the process of career change (Ibarra, 2005).

In addition to these multidimensional theories which have identity at their heart, there are many theories which explore specific aspects of identity and their role in career development. Values are emphasised in a number of different theoretical approaches. In Hall and Mirvis's theory of the *protean career* (Hall, 1996), the authors suggest that a protean career path is one that is both self-directed and values-driven. Brown (1996) and Corlozzi (2003) discuss the importance of value congruence, which is the degree to which an individual's values are mirrored by the values of the organisation they work for. Dik and Duffy (2009) have written widely about vocation or calling and how it can impact, positively and negatively, on individual careers. Numerous theories examine the role of demographic characteristics including gender (Gottfredson, 2002), class (Heppner & Scott, 2004), sexuality (Fassinger, 1995) and race (Helms & Piper, 1994).

Career theories thus acknowledge that identity has a significant impact on career development. But individuals do not develop or define themselves in a contextual vacuum, and alongside this focus on identity, many authors highlight the pivotal role that environment plays in identity formation and career development.

Environment

An individual's environment consists of myriad different facets which are both fluid (subject to constant change) and socially constructed (developed and conceptualised by the individual in response to their experiences). The relationship between the environment and the

individual is dynamic and the individual both influences and is influenced by their environment.

Influential career development theories which focus on the role that the environment plays are wide ranging. Roberts' *opportunity structures theory* (2009) identifies the importance of the environment into which we are born, and the opportunities to which we are exposed, highlighting the critical impact that socio-economic class has on career development. Conceptualisations of work are influenced by the immediate and wider context in which an individual finds themselves, and theories such as Gottfredson's theory of *circumspection and compromise* (2002) demonstrate that images or preconceptions of work, based on a combination of personal experience and exposure to social norms or stereotypes, have an impact on the identities, aspirations and career goals of even quite young children.

The influence of social, cultural and human capital has been incorporated into career development theory by Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer (2011), and by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) in their sociological *careership theory* which treads a careful path between assuming that individuals have complete freedom to make their own choices, and reducing career development to the product of social determinism. Hodkinson and Sparkes pay particular attention to Bourdieu's notions of habitus (ingrained behaviour and attitudes) and fields (settings in which people compete for desirable resources). They develop key concepts which are relevant across the social spectrum, such as horizons for action, the idea that people's choices are inevitably limited to the opportunities and possibilities that they are aware of, and pragmatic rationality, a decision-making process that relies in part on tacit information, incomplete knowledge and others' opinions.

The impact of chance events is incorporated into a number of career theories. Mitchell, Krumboltz and Levin's theory of *planned happenstance* (1996) highlights the importance of

noticing and taking advantage of opportunities, and Pryor and Bright's *chaos theory of careers* (2003) conceptualises people as complex systems which are influenced by the complex system of the world around them and the chance events which that generates.

Other people play a significant part in an individual's career development and many theories acknowledge the inevitable and often valuable role that other people play in our career decisions. Blustein, Schultheiss, and Flum (2004) offer a *relational theory of careers* which holds that career development is socially situated and intrinsically relational. The authors contend that context is an integral part of career development, and an individual's conceptualisation of work or career is developed through relationships with others. Individual perspectives of the world are therefore both culturally and historically embedded, and innately individual. Each of us makes our own interpretation of a shared world, as seen from our unique perspective. Alongside theories which show how environments can shape individuals and their career paths, a number of theories highlight the way that individuals can influence their environments including the *theory of work adjustment* (Dawis & Loftquist, 1994) and *job crafting* (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

These first two themes of identity and environment encompass the key influences on the content of career development. The next two themes: career learning, and psychological career resources; focus on the process of career development.

Career learning

Learning in career development concerns building up understanding about oneself, the environment and the interplay between the two. This knowledge develops in different ways and career learning theories explore both the context in which the learning can take place, and the underlying cognitive processes.

One tranche of career theories explores the impact that interactions with others have on career learning. Law (1981) highlights people's interactions within their local communities in his *community interaction theory*, which foregrounds the influence of an individual's interactions with their peers, family, teachers at school, neighbourhood and ethnic group and stresses the explanatory and predictive power of these exchanges. At the heart of the s*ocial learning theory of career decision making* (Mitchell, Jones & Krumboltz, 1979) is vicarious learning, which explains that learning comes not only from reflecting on our own experiences, but from reflecting on the experiences of others. Mitchell et al. identify two types of learning experiences which lead to a better understanding of oneself and one's context: instrumental, through which people develop interest in activities in which they succeed, and associative learning where people build up overall impressions of phenomena based on all the images and encounters they have had throughout our lives. Atkinson and Murrell (1988) offer a meta-model based on Kolb's learning cycle which highlights the importance of experiential learning and reflection.

Turning now to the cognitive aspects of career learning, Law's *career learning theory***,** (1999) explores the processes that people use to examine and make judgements about career information and offers a four stage model: 1. sensing (gathering information), 2. sifting (making sense of the information: comparing, mapping and creating a narrative), 3. focusing (making a judgement – deciding on one's personal view) and 4. understanding (identifying goals and putting plans into action). *Cognitive information processing theory* (Peterson, Sampson & Reardon, 1991) proposes that there are three domains of knowledge which work together to make career decisions. First there are knowledge domains*:* self-knowledge and occupational knowledge, which together make up the 'database' of information needed. Then there are generic information processing skills (communication, analysis, synthesis, and execution) provide the skills needed to actually make the decisions. Thirdly there are meta-

cognitions, which coordinate the brain activity through identifying and selecting the relevant information.

These career theories help us to understand how people absorb and process information. The final theme in this framework focuses on the psychological resources which can be operationalised to assist individuals as they develop their careers.

Psychological Career Resources

Theories of psychological career resources help us to understand and explain the factors which equip people to navigate their career paths and make positive choices. The constructs discussed below (self-efficacy, adaptability, resilience, hope, and optimism) appear frequently in models and theories of career resources. These are aspects of an individual's character which may influence or contribute towards their identity, and are introduced here as resources which facilitate career development.

Self-efficacy is a measure of self-belief (Bandura, 1977). Those with high levels of self-efficacy, i.e. those who believe that they have the skills and resources to achieve a particular task, are likely to put more effort into the task, and demonstrate better coping strategies. Self-efficacy is core to many career theories, notably, Lent, Brown and Hackett's *social cognitive career theory* (1994). This theory is a complex one which acknowledges the interwoven nature of a number of different aspects of career, and highlights the role that outcome expectations and self-efficacy have on personal choice. Self-efficacy has also taken centre stage in theories about women's career development (Betz & Hackett, 1983) as levels of self-efficacy have been shown to account for some of the differences in men's and women's career paths.

Two qualities which have received significant attention in the literature in recent years are *adaptability* and *resilience*. Career adaptability is described as the ability to anticipate change

and to develop the strategies and skills needed to negotiate the changes which lie ahead; resilience is the ability to respond to changes once they have taken place (Bimrose & Hearn, 2012). Savickas and Porfeli (2012) developed their model of *career adapt-abilities* which incorporates four specific qualities: concern (planning), curiosity (exploration), confidence (self-efficacy) and control (decision making). The notion of pro-active adaptability is also central to Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth's conceptualisation of employability (2004). They describe employability as a psycho-social construct, comprising career identity, social and human capital, and pro-active adaptability.

The last two resources included here are *hope* (Snyder, 2002) and *optimism* (Carver, Scheier & Segerstrom, 2010). Hope is described as the combination of a goal, a vision of a clear pathway to that goal, and the motivation to realise the goal (Snyder, 2002). This combination has been shown to have a positive impact on career development, as those with higher levels of hope are better able to set their own career goals, and more likely to realise them. Optimism is a positive assumption that things are likely to turn out well. People with higher levels of optimism are more likely to develop good relationships, to have more perseverance and to cope better when faced with adversity. Optimism has been shown to help with resource building (Scheier & Carver, 2003), and the development of networks and social support (Brissette, Scheier & Carver, 2002).

Alongside the literature which focuses on these individual constructs, there are more complex models which combine various of the elements above, alongside other constructs or resources. Hirschi combines hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism with identity resources and social and human capital, in his model of *career resources* (Hirschi, 2012), and the same four constructs are combined by Luthans and Youssef (2004) to form a higher-order construct described as *psychological capital*. Arthur, Claman, and Defillipi's *intelligent career model* (1995), defines career capital as an accumulation of three types of knowledge:

knowing why (motivation and self awareness), knowing how (the skills and knowledge needed to do the job well) and knowing whom (the networks who can give you access to opportunities and information).

The framework in practice

This thematic overview of career theories comprises the themes of identity, environment, career learning, and psychological career resources. This synthesis aims to offer an explanation of the complex phenomenon of career development. Yet whilst an overview of the theoretical landscape is valuable, perhaps more important is an account of how this model can be applied in practice, and how it can add value to those making career choices. The model can be used within planned career education programmes or as a tool to help understand and guide one to one career conversations.

Using the four themes to guide a career education programme can ensure that clients are offered the opportunity to consider their own career development broadly, acknowledging and addressing each aspect of the framework. The model offers four distinct themes but, of course, the actual process of making career choices is not divided into four discrete chronological stages. A career education programme that draws on this framework needs to acknowledge the interwoven, concurrent complexities of the process, referring backwards and forwards, and encouraging clients to make their own links between the different segments themselves.

The model offers two themes which focus on content (identity and environment) and two which are process orientated (career learning and psychological resources). Sessions might cover topics which incorporate both identity and environment, or might focus on concepts that put one or other in the spotlight, but all sessions will benefit from drawing on our

understanding of the process of career learning, and all sessions can offer an opportunity to enhance relevant psychological resources.

During a group session which includes a focus on identity, participants can be encouraged to ask themselves 'Who am I?' and 'Who do I want to be?'. Practitioners can draw on the career style interview (Savickas, 2011), use a possible selves exercise (Hock, Schumaker, & Deshier, 2003), or apply the depth orientated values extraction to help clients to crystalise their values (Corlozzi, 2003). When focusing on their environment, participants should be encouraged to consider 'What is influencing me?' and 'What are the opportunities open to me?'. There are practical exercises offered as part of the theories of planned happenstance (Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz, 1999) and the chaos theory of careers (Pryor & Bright, 2003) which can facilitate participants to focus on external influences. Sessions should not cover any one of these topics in isolation. Environment and identity are distinct but not unrelated constructs: environment influences identity, and identity influences environment. Participants should always be encouraged to consider these bi-directional influences, and to acknowledge that both identity and environment affect all aspects of their lives, including their interpretations of their own experiences.

The two process themes, career learning and psychological resources should underpin every session. An undercurrent of career learning will ensure that participants examine 'What do I know?' and work out 'How do I make sense of it all?', whatever the topic in question. A session plan which has been devised according to the principles of sensing, sifting, focusing and understanding from career learning theory (Law, 1999), or the different domains of knowledge from cognitive information processing theory (Peterson, Sampson & Reardon, 1991) and which acknowledges and capitalises on the information learned from others (Law, 1981; Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz, 1979) will lead to more effective learning and more in-depth understanding.

A focus on psychological resources, the final theme of the framework, within career education could support participants to develop the skills to expedite their paths towards their career goals, answering the question 'How can I give myself the best chance to get where I want to go?'. Clients' psychological resources can be developed using the practical interventions from the *career adapt-abilities* model (Porfeli & Savickas, 2012), and *psychological capital* (Luthans, 2006) and sessions could also incorporate opportunities for vicarious learning and the chance for individuals to share their own successes in order to increase their psychological resources.

In a one to one context, the framework has two distinct contributions to make. First, it can offer some guidance for the direction of conversation. With the four themes in mind, a practitioner can assess the progress made prior to or during a career conversation, and judge whether the conversation is covering the most important ground, asking themselves and perhaps their clients too, whether the focus should be shifted to another area. A client who has spent some time considering their identity might usefully be encouraged to question whether a discussion about their environment could be of value; one who seems lacking in confidence about their choices could be invited to consider their psychological career resources to see whether some discussions or interventions in that sphere could help them to feel more efficacious about their future.

The framework too can validate clients' own stories or feelings: if they learn that the particular challenge which they are facing is acknowledged within a theoretical framework, a client may feel that they are not alone, and this can give them a sense of reassurance and a confidence in their ability to move forwards. A young person who is feeling overwhelmed at the magnitude and complexity of the career development choices they need to make may be reassured to know that the choice is a complex one for most people, and sharing a framework

such as this with a client may suggest potentially fruitful avenues for exploration, serving as a template which can highlight some key areas as yet unexplored or unchallenged.

Conclusion

Decades of research in this field have led to an extraordinary range of detailed and valuable theories explaining aspects of career development. The thematic overview of career theories presented in this chapter has incorporated key ideas from over 40 of the most well-known and influential of these, grouped around four themes. This integrated framework highlights first the many aspects of identity which career theories have covered; then the different aspects of one's environment which have an impact on identity development and opportunities, both subjective and objective; the processes by which people learn and understand career and careers; and finally the psychological resources which support individuals as they make their choices and put their plans into action. The model synthesises a wealth of information, ideas and concepts, and draws from different academic disciplines, philosophical traditions and decades. It focuses on alignments and synergies and shows how theories can be brought together to explain different facets of the phenomenon. It is hoped that the clarity and parsimony of the framework will enable practitioners to make use of the theoretical ideas to enhance their practice and better serve their clients.

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