

# THEORETICAL FRAMES FOR THE NEW TASKS IN CAREER GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING

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## Abstract

Personal and career development interventions aim to help people find answers to personal and career development issues that stem from the societal context in which they live. Societal definitions of these career issues have a double consequence. On the one hand, these issues differ from one culture to another; and, on the other, they evolve along with the contexts in which they are expressed. Implementation of rigorous career development interventions requires, first, a scientific reconstruction of these societal issues and, second, a clear definition of these interventions' goals and ends.

Our current view of the societal issues relating to personal and career development interventions may be phrased thus--"How can we help individuals direct their lives, in the (human) society where they interact?" It may be turned into the following scientific question: "What are the factors and processes of life-long self-construction?" An articulation of three major propositions (sociological, cognitive and dynamic) seems to be needed to answer this question. Such a theoretical frame does not allow for a definition of personal and career development interventions ends. In the world of today, the adoption by everyone of a personal ethic of responsibility towards all life on Earth (H. Jonas) could well be a fundamental end to these interventions.

**Key words:** theories; career; representations; self-construction.

I, today, have been asked to speak on the following topic: «Theoretical frames for the new tasks in career guidance and counseling». In order to deal with this subject, I would like to start with an observation: «tasks in career guidance and counseling» are practical answers to issues that stem from the context of society; that is, they are particular to a given societal context.

In the first part of my presentation, I will present the three personal and career development issues that manifest themselves in today's industrialized societies. I will then try to show how these issues are linked to a fundamental question which I formulate thus: "how best to direct one's life in one's human societal context?" Personal and career development interventions - guidance, counseling or education - aim to help the individual find his / her personal answer to this question.

In the second part of my presentation I will point out the two conditions necessary for

these interventions to be effective. The first being: that the interventions be founded on a proven knowledge base. And the second: that their objectives and ends be clearly defined.

I will then elaborate on the first of these conditions, that is, a proven knowledge base. My argument is that to develop such a knowledge base, we need first to transform the societal issue of personal and career development into a scientific question. I shall present the scientific question that to my mind best corresponds to our societal question – which is, as I just said, “How best direct one’s life in one’s human societal context?” I shall put forth a theoretical framework that I deem best suited to answer this question, taking into account the present state of our knowledge in the domain of human and social sciences.

To conclude, I will briefly touch upon the second condition required to implement rigorous career development interventions: that is a clear definition of their objectives and ends. Especially, I’ll say a word about a major purpose of these interventions: their ethical end.

## **1. Directing one’s life in contemporary, industrialized society**

I would like to begin with the personal and career development issues that manifest themselves in today’s industrialized societies.

Two large categories of factors play a significant role in the definition of these issues at a given moment, in a particular societal context. The first being collective beliefs and representations, and the second – concrete ways in which work and education (and training) are organized and employment distributed.

### **1.1 Collective beliefs and representations**

Four collective representations play a major role in the manner in which personal and career development issues manifest themselves in today’s industrialized societies: an individualistic model of society, the conception of the individual as autonomous and responsible for «what she/he makes of her/himself», the importance to a career in self-realization and uncertainty with regard to the future.

In contemporary, western societies the «I» is primordial in the «Us – I» equilibrium. Geert Hofstede (Cultures and Organizations, 1991) observed, by way of a comparative study of 53 countries that they can be significantly differentiated along the «collectivism» - «individualism» dimension. In collectivistic societies – all of which are situated in South America, Asia and Africa – the individual is strongly integrated in groups that protect him/her in exchange for loyalty. In individualistic societies – Western and in particular Anglo-Saxon – each individual is required to take charge of

himself / herself and his / her immediate family.

Here, the fundamental issue of personal and career development is that of the individual trying to determine what to make of his/her life. It is not the issue of a community (or of one of its members) reflecting on what this member should do for the community's sake. We conceive the individual essentially as an autonomous subject responsible for his/her choices. We believe that it is up to him / her to decide the path his / her life should take. We, definitely, feel that he / she can be assisted in this process, but no longer believe that the advice can take on a «directive» form, as described by Frank Parsons in 1909. In terms of the choices the individual has to make, we consider fundamental those related to his / her career: we hold that pursuing a career is a privileged occasion to realise one's potential.

At the same time, we are «uncertain» as to what the future holds, and can not see ourselves as being able to make reliable predictions about the future. This is the case in the domain of employment, whereby by over 50% of the employment now created in Europe is precarious, and will represent 75% in 2007 (Palmade, 2003, p. 32).

Therefore, personal and career development interventions are addressed toward this individual who belongs to today's individualistic society, is centered on his career path, but is uncertain about the future. These interventions are destined toward he / she, whom Alain Ehrenberg (1995) has called «the uncertain individual».

## **1.2 Work- education- and training- organizations and employment distribution**

A second group of factors combine with these representations and beliefs to determine personal and career development issues in a given society at a given point in time. These factors refer to forms of work organization, training and education, as well as the modes of employment distribution.

I am not going to insist upon this point today, but serve to remind that there exists a major link, on the one hand, between work systems, forms of school organization, the distribution of employment and, on the other, personal and career development issues that stem from a given context (Guichard & Huteau, 2003).

## **1.3 Three personal and career development issues characteristic of today's industrialized society**

In today's industrialized society the personal and career development issues can be summarized in three broad questions:

- What stream or option should I choose in school, given my academic performance and my personal and familial expectations with regard to my integration in the professional world and society, in the future?

- How to capitalize on my diverse experiences and define professional/occupational and personal projects?
- How to cope with the multiple transitions I will face during the course of my life?

Every student is required to ask him / herself the first question. It is the societal problem of personal and career development of youth in societies where school holds a fundamental place in education. In these societies, school is a complex origination that offers different types of curricula, training, establishments, etc. An organization of this nature implies procedures of distribution and selection or tracking of students. Students are forced to choose an academic path taking into account the structure of the organization as well as, the implicit and explicit rules of distribution and selection or tracking.

The second question is that asked by adults who have a certain control over their career. These individuals are in the primary segment of the job market, where jobs require a high level of education or training, and constitute the “central” workforce of companies, today. Relatively polyvalent, the likelihood of their being laid off when the economy is weak is feeble, as they constitute the core of human capital that allows a company to survive. As their work allows them to develop new competencies, they can consequently think to further developing their careers.

The third question tends usually to be posed by those whose work situation is precarious. These individuals constitute the second segment of the job market, where jobs merely require on-the-spot training. They are the “fringe” employees a company hires or fires on the basis of the demands made by the economy. These individuals occupational lives consist of a series of diverse jobs, often little qualified, periods of unemployment and imposed part-time jobs, etc. Hence, they have not a real professional career, and live to a rhythm of multiple transitions with which they must cope.

#### **1.4 A question in common: how best direct one’s life?**

While different these questions can be synthesized more generally as: “how best direct one’s life in the society that one inhabits?” This question constitutes a “rewording” of these three questions. Rewording should be understood here as a synthesis pertaining to an interpretation from a certain perspective. I would like to briefly comment on the terms “synthesis” and “interpretation”.

Synthesis, first. This question – “how best direct one’s life in the society that one inhabits?” – is pertinent, as the three one it encompasses, to the context of today’s individualistic societies. It is a question addressed to the individual, here and now.

However, this question is also an interpretation, in a first sense, of the three others. It is

a question about the direction to give one's life. It is not only about career choices. The issues related to counseling today are indeed far larger than that of "career development" in the traditional sense of a progression in one's profession(1). And this, because of a fundamental reason: In today's context, work activity finds its meaning for the individual only in relation to his/her other activities and roles.

Definitely, in our society, for a lot of individuals their profession is central to their existence.

But nonetheless, it does not constitute their only activity or role. For other individuals, the situation is different and "extra-professional" activities are central. Nevertheless, in all cases, work activities find their meaning only in relation to other activities and roles. In some cases, individuals value more what they do at work. In other cases, it is the contrary. Consequently, it is not possible to limit the question of counseling to the choice of a career.

This is what school or career counselors notice, for they have observed that, at times, the coping with transition in a domain of one's life disrupts other life spheres (sometimes only remotely related). Hence, more than the career, it is the "life path" which is at the heart of the issue of counseling in today's industrialized society.

## **2. A theoretical framework to develop pertinent personal and career development interventions.**

Personal and career development interventions aim to help individuals find their unique response to the question related to what path or direction their lives should take. In order for these interventions to be operational two conditions need to be fulfilled.

### **2.1 Two conditions to develop rigorous personal and career development interventions**

The first of these conditions is to know the factors and processes that influence selfconstruction. This can only be achieved by way of a scientific approach that integrates knowledge from different disciplines. It is such a model that I shall elaborate forth with. Without this knowledge the said interventions risk being either ineffective or worse yet attain results different from those intended.

The second condition required is that these interventions' objectives and ends be precisely defined. I feel it important to differentiate objectives from ends (or finalities). The objectives denote concrete goals to the said interventions. They could include, for example, helping an individual cope with a transition, helping someone identify the roles and activities central to his / her existence, allowing a high-school student find his / her interests, etc.

Ends or finalities refer to the human and societal meaning of these objectives. Questions of ends are teleological ones. They are the kinds of issues that individuals address when questioning the meaning of their existence, the value of their lives' objectives, about the society and world in which they would like to live, etc.

It is also to these ends or finalities that the term "best" refers in the aforementioned question: "how 'best' direct one's life?" And this is why this question is also an interpretation – in a second sense – of the three preceding ones. "Best" refers to the meaning and purpose of life. It introduces an ethical perspective, from which stems personal questioning on how to direct one's life.

I shall come back to this point at the end. At the moment, I would like to briefly present the theoretical framework that, to my mind, allows one to adequately integrate the knowledge required for the development of interventions aimed at helping individuals best direct their life.

## **2.2 Theoretical framework: factors and processes – universal and determined – of life-long self-construction**

The scientific question that, in my opinion, allows one to better outline the societal issues in personal and career development that exist today is: What are the factors and processes of life-long self-construction?

In this question the term "self-construction" merits comment. One could well imagine the terms "self-development" or "personal development" and the question would have been: what are the factors and processes for life-long personal development?

Self-construction is better suited for two reasons. The first being that "development" connotes the idea of unfurling something that is already here – "enveloped" – when the conditions are favorable. On the contrary, "construction" connotes the idea of an evolution dependant upon contexts and events that arise. This does not imply that this construction would depend only upon characteristics of the contexts the individual encounters and that there are no universal processes or factors therein. As we shall see, certain processes or factors appear to be universally human despite that they take on particular forms given the context.

The second reason for which I prefer the term "construction" over "development" is that the former as opposed to the latter connotes that the individual plays an active role in how his / her life evolves, that the individual acts, thinks, dialogues, etc. Here, the individual is more than the passive subject for a "development" that would transform his / her life in spite of him / herself.

In order to describe the factors and processes of this self-construction I (Guichard, 2001 & Guichard, 2005) deem it necessary to articulate three broad propositions that

can respectively be qualified as “sociological,” “cognitive,” and “dynamic.”

### **2.2.1 Sociological proposition**

The sociological proposition takes into account that self-construction occurs in particular social contexts. Specifically, each society is characterized by an “identity offer”: an offer of various social categories (gender, religion, occupation, ethnicity, typology, characterology, etc.) in which each individual can recognize him/herself and/or recognize others (Dubar, 1992). This offer is structured, but is more or less diversified and “homogeneous” according to societies.

In industrialized and global societies, this offer is diverse and evolving. Each of us is engaged in a continuous self-reflecting activity (Giddens, 1991). This activity depends on specific modes (and techniques) of relating to oneself that prevail at a given moment, in a given society (Foucault, 1986, 1988). Thus, individuals construct themselves in a specific way, in relation to these different modes (and techniques) of relating to oneself. They construct themselves according to several different self-relating modes in relation to the contexts where they interact. Psychologists speak of a plurality of “self-concepts” and sociologists of a “plural (wo) man.”

### **2.2.2 Cognitive proposition**

The second proposition reckons with the cognitive structures involved in these processes of self-construction. Due to their interactions and interlocutions in a given social context, individuals construct, in long term memory, cognitive structures that allow them organize their conception of others and construct themselves. These structures can be named identity (cognitive) frames. These identity frames are relative to all kinds of social categories constituting the “identity offer” for a given individual in a given society: gender, religion, sexual preference, occupation, etc.

Cognitive frames are structured sets of attributes, having default values (Minsky, 1975). The default values of identity frames attributes are social stereotypes (for example, a default value “masculine” given to the attribute “gender” of the identity frame “engineer”). These frames make up, in all people’s mind, a system of (cognitive) identity frames. This system constitutes the individual’s internalized representation of the identity offer of the society with which she/he interacts.

As with any cognitive structure, these identity frames are substrata of representations, judgments, and actions. They are the grounding of others’ perception and of self-construction in some “identity forms.”

An “identity form” constitutes a ‘view’ of another individual or a ‘self-construction’, according to the structure of one of these frames. “Subjective identity forms” are forms

in which a given individual sees and constructs him/herself. Self-construction, in a certain subjective identity form, leads to giving some particular default values to the attributes of the underlying frame: the individual 'identizes' him/herself (Tap, 1980). Depending on the contexts in which individuals interact, they construct themselves in different subjective identity forms, these substitute one another, but are nevertheless related to each other and are seen by individuals as different ways of being themselves.

### **2.2.3 Dynamic proposition**

The last proposition is a "dynamic" one. It contends that human conduct cannot be reduced to a simple reproduction of internalized behaviors (patterns) learned during previous experiences. The dynamism of the self-construction process originates in a tension between two fundamental types of reflexivity (Guichard, 2003, & Guichard, 2005).

Reflexive self-anticipation describes the primordial process of relating to oneself, the constitution of which was described by Jacques Lacan (1977), in what he termed the "mirror stage." Around 12-15 months, before mastering language, children, enthralled by their own self-image in the looking-glass are led to anticipate themselves as this unified and autonomous being that they will become, whereas they feel their bodies as dependant and multiple. Hence, this reflexivity is dual: constituting the substratum (prior to language) of an "I – me" reflexivity, it constitutes the subjects and their dynamism. The point – from which the (not yet) "me" anticipates themselves as the one they will be in the future – will be referred to as (when language is mastered) the "I".

This form of reflexivity can be considered as a primordial form of relating to oneself that explains future enthralling by diverse images of others with which children, adolescents and even adults identify. These can be: neighborhood figures, scene, stadium or screens idols, charismatic political or religious leaders, etc. These diverse images are models to which individuals refer for their self-constructions. They imagine themselves in the future identity form that any one of these models represents in their view (as observed in the adolescent's act of dreaming or imagining its possible occupational future, by Dumora, 1990). This vision constitutes an "I" that enralls every adolescent and incarnates who s/he aspires to be.

The second reflexivity form supposes language mastery. It is based on the articulation of the three positions of "I", "you" and "s/he". This is why it can be called a trinity and dialogical reflexivity. It is dialogical in the sense that it implies a dialogue – internal or interpersonal – made up of an ongoing flow between three positions: (1) "I" who enunciates something to "you", (2) "you" who answers him/her, and (3) s/he, who is



spoken of, the “I” considered from outside by two dialoguing individuals (two “you”). This trinity dialogical reflexivity accounts for self-conscience as an ongoing process of self-interpretation throughout a dialogue during which the individual moves from one position to another. This kind of reflexivity is formed through specific “language games”, in a psychological symbiosis (Harré, 1984) between a mother and a child where the mother teaches her child the articulation of these three poles.

These two kinds of reflexivity – dual and trinity – are at odds. In the first one, the “other” (the looking-glass image) is an object to identify with (sometimes: an object to repulse). In the trinity reflexivity, the other is the “you” with whom “I” begin a dialogue, by taking the position of “I” in this relation to “you”. These different “you” -internal or external others -permit this self-interpretation. Trinity reflexivity is a process of “personalizing”. According to Malrieu (2003) personalizing can be defined as an ongoing activity of self-synthesis, during which individuals give meaning to their life through a reinterpretation of their past experiences, and notably of those when they constituted themselves “as this one” in this particular relation to others, a relationship which was progressively internalized. It is a process of self-construction as a person in a society of other persons.

That these two forms of reflexivity are heterogeneous does not imply they are not linked. On the contrary, they are related. But these links can be contrasted. In some cases, the identifying relations (I – me) are reconsidered in a dialogical interpretation process. Crystallizations in such identity form are examined from different viewpoints and reinterpreted during a personalizing process.

Other cases are just the opposite. The trinity dialogue “I – you – s/he” is set rigidly in a dialogue “my-self, yourself, him/herself”, where the different positions are referred back to some crystallized identity forms, in which individuals appear as being stuck. They are “alienated”, “trapped” in their world: a world of their identification with stereotyped and fixed forms through which they perceive themselves and others and construct themselves.

### **Conclusion: What are the ends (finalities) to personal and career development interventions?**

This tentative theorization seems able to bring about a universal answer to the scientific question underlying our current interventions, aiming at helping people in their life-long career and personal constructions. As mentioned earlier, this question could be stated as follows: What are the factors and processes of life-long self-construction?

The proposed answer to this question leads to differentiating some universal processes of self construction (tension between two types of reflexivity; the involved cognitive

structures) and certain determined processes and contents of this construction (determined forms of relating to oneself; determined identity frames systems and subjective identity forms).

This attempt accounts for both self-constructions and processes in personal and career interventions. These interventions – and, in particular, career counseling interviews – may be seen as opportunities for clients to engage themselves in a process of reflection (a trinity dialogical one articulating “I”, “you” and “s/he”) about the subjective identity forms (past, present and future) in which they construct themselves, about the identity frames system in which these forms are anchored and, also, about their usual way of relating to themselves.

Such counseling interventions constitute examinations from different viewpoints by individuals of their current situation, of what is self-evident, but is nevertheless rarely examined as such. This is why these interventions can be defined as liberating processes.

They indeed help clients re-read, interpret, examine their past, according to diverse possible self-constructions in such or such future identity form (alternatively or simultaneously). Nevertheless, all counseling interventions are not necessarily of this kind. Some of them could probably be qualified, using the terminology of Marcia (1966), as forclusive ones. These interventions aim at helping clients construct themselves quickly in some socially desirable identity forms. To do so, they skim over this task of thoughtfully constructing and interpreting a field of possibilities from diverse future possible “I” viewpoints.

### **Self-construction and Ethic**

In every case, the processes of dialogical reflection that implies selfconstruction always make reference to others: formally, on the one hand, and their contents, on the other.

Formally, because, as we have seen, thinking about one’s personal and professional future supposes a process of dialogue (internal or inter-individual), a trinity dialogue where the perspectives of “I,” “You,” and “S/he” are articulated.

As for psychological content, such a thought drives one to examine from the point of view of others a given intention or possible engagement and commit oneself to a dialogue on this topic with one’s diverse “others” (internal or external). The others usually called upon at the time of such thinking are close to the individual. For example, a high-school student could say to him / herself, “should I choose this stream, my father would say..., however, I would respond thus..., etc.”

A consideration such, from the point of view of others, introduces an ethical perspective in the individual’s thought. Indeed, as noted by Paul Ricoeur, the ethical intention

constitutes the articulation of “a triad where oneself, close others and distant others are equally honored: to live well, with and for others, in fair institutions” (Paul Ricoeur, 2004, p. 694).

When one thinks about the direction one’s life should take, it is first and often only the close others who are taken into account: will my taking such a path be good for them? Is it right? Is it fair?

The “distant others” or the “fair institutions” that Ricoeur speaks of are generally not taken into account. This is why it can be said that this thought always occurs in terms of a certain “horizon of ethical examination.” It is an ethical examination in the measure where “how to live well / in harmony with others” is very present. Nevertheless, this thought implies no more than a horizon, in that the implications “for others” are not necessarily considered, not any more than the “distant others” or the “fair institutions”.

However, in today’s societies, the “implications for others” in certain individual choices are increasingly going further than one’s immediate circle. Such a conclusion springs from Ulrich Beck’s (1986) work: “Risk society: towards a new modernity”. Beck observes that besides natural risks, there exist major technological risks, examples of which are the Tchernobyl and Bhopal disasters. These “new” risks are not only technological but also ecological, humanitarian and genetic.

Based on analogous observations, the philosopher Hans Jonas (1984) formulated a primordial, ethical principle in his work: “The imperative of responsibility. In search for an ethics for the technical age” He enunciates this imperative as follows: “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life on Earth” (Jonas, 1977, p. 36).

Admittedly, Jonas indicates (p.37) that this imperative is intended more to public politics than to private conduct. This does not exclude the individual from examining his / her acts or choices in the light of such an imperative. In doing so, any individual, who is thinking about the direction his / her life should take, moves from “the horizon of ethical examination” (as we have seen: a horizon always considered in such a reflection) to an “ethical examination.”

This occurs every time that the “you” (or “I”) in an internal or external dialogue explicitly introduces the possible or probable consequences for “undetermined human beings” by committing to a certain choice or option. This could give rise to dialogues such as:

- “If you take up finance do you not then risk practicing a profession where you will be expected to make credit offers to people who can not afford them?”
- “Studying finance could lead me to work in institutions such as the World Bank, one of which’s objectives is implementing development programs in countries that need them.”

Conducting such an ethical examination means examining life goals – particularly professional one – from the point of view of their ethical finalities. Such an examination tends not to be easy. Indeed, the relations between “personal objectives” and “human ends” are complex. For example, competences developed in the domain of human relations can either serve for the emancipation of human groups or, on the contrary, to their detriment (manipulation, etc).

Analyses such as those of Beck or Jonas highlight the capital importance, today, for humanity to develop this ethical dimension that always implies – to the minimum: in the form of a horizon of ethical examination – the trinity thought process about one’s personal and career development.

These analyses have a consequence in the domain of the professional ethic of school or career counselors. It seems, indeed, that their duty towards humanity demands of them to favor the development of this ethical perspective in those who consult them about the direction their lives should take.

Such a development might notably occur through a process that I mentioned when I began this talk: the “rewording” in an ethical perspective of today’s personal and career development issues. This rewording, as we have seen, seems to lead to a more general question: “how best direct one’s life in the human society that one inhabits?”

Ricoeur and Jonas, now, permit me to be more precise with regard to what “best direct one’s life” signifies. Jeremy Rifkin (2004) in a recent work provides us, in my opinion, with a synthetic view. He observes that the human family is faced with an unfulfilled task: adopting a “personal ethic” of responsibility in consideration of the vast communities of life that constitute Earth. And he concludes that, if we want truly to change things, it is necessary that the promise in favor of other human beings, our kind, and our biosphere be the fruit of profound personal awareness and at the same time the objective of a collective legislation”.

### **Notes**

1. Richard Young and L Collin defined “career” quite differently: “Career can be seen as an overarching construct that gives meaning to the individual’s life. [Career can be described] as a superordinate construct that allows people to construct connections among actions, to account for effort, plans, goals, and consequences, to frame internal cognitions and emotions, and to use feedback and feed-forward processes (Young & Collin, 2000, p.5). This encompassing conception of “career” is close to the idea of “self-construction” presented here.

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