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- 1 Recently, in psychology and other social sciences where practice is important, the calls for evidence-based practice have become more pronounced (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006). In these disciplines, evidence-based practice borrows from evidence-based medicine which has been defined as,  

...the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients. The practice of evidence based medicine means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research. (Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes & Richardson, 1996, p.71)
- 2 Sackett and his colleagues (1996) emphasize both parts of the contribution to evidence-based practice, that is, integrating the experience and judgement of individual clinicians with external evidence. The latter is based on research in the basic sciences and patient-centred clinical research. In this research, the call for demonstrating the effectiveness or efficacy of interventions has been a significant focus. Mimicking this standard of the medical field, researchers and practitioners in psychology and social science practice disciplines readily use terms like evidence-based interventions and empirically-supported and manualized treatments. These issues are not without debate (Wendt & Slife, 2007), but they have taken hold in some areas of psychology as the gold standard of practice. The domains of counselling psychology (Wampold, Lichtenberg & Waehler, 2002) and specifically vocational counselling (Whiston, Sexton & Lasoff, 1998; Whiston, Brecheisen & Stephens, 2003) and career guidance (Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes, 2005; Maguire, 2004; Niedlich, Christ, Korte, Berlinger & Aurich, 2007) have also been concerned with the efficacy and effectiveness of counselling and other interventions.
- 3 The issues in vocational counselling are different from the classic domains of medicine and related areas in which evidence-based interventions are commonplace. First, as

Miranda *et al.* (2005) pointed out, where there is a diagnosable mental or physical illness, precisely defined care or interventions can be provided, and randomized, controlled clinical trials are possible; one may be able to determine the efficacy of treatments. Similarly, the same interventions can be examined for their effectiveness when applied in more diverse, real-world settings. Secondly, while psychotherapy theories are identified within narrowly defined schools with particular methods of intervention, for example, psychodynamic or cognitive-behavioral, vocational counselling and counselling psychology often promote integrative views, on the one hand, and a number of intervention techniques not tightly tied to particular schools, on the other. Thirdly, while psychotherapy has always been competitive with psychopharmacological intervention and thus research on both was inclined to collect similar data, the situation and the tasks of vocational counselling are often different from psychotherapy. Fourthly, for a long time, psychotherapy adhered to the illness-overcoming rather than the life-facilitating paradigm. In contrast, vocational counselling and counselling psychology were, from the very beginning, facilitative interventions.

- 4 These arguments lead us to question whether the standards and methods of evidence-based medicine and case-controlled studies can be applied equally to vocational counselling. To answer this question, we begin with descriptions of the domains of vocational counselling and career guidance, as the evaluation of a domain depends on its characteristics and features. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [2004] defined “career guidance” as,

Services intended to assist people of any age and at any point throughout their lives to make educational, training and occupational choices to manage their career. Career guidance helps people to reflect on their ambitions, interests, qualifications and abilities. It helps them to understand the labour market and education systems, and to relate this to what they know about themselves. Comprehensive career guidance tries to teach people to plan and make decisions about work and learning. Career guidance makes information about the labour market and about educational opportunities more accessible by organizing it, systematising it and making it available when and where people need it. (p.19)

- 5 This definition is reflected in Guichard and Huteau’s (2006) definition of *l’orientation* as,

...la réparation des élèves dans les filières du système scolaire et différentes activités visant à préparer collégiens et lycéens à effectuer des choix de carrière professionnelle et personnelle. D’autre part, l’orientation est aussi conçue comme un ensemble de pratiques visant à aider les adultes lors des transitions qui marquent le cours de leur vie. (p.3)

- 6 These definitions not only suggest what vocational counsellors do, but what counselling is supposed to achieve. Furthermore, they affirm that counselling is a goal-directed process. They also imply that there is a clear goal or conception of what the client should be doing as a result of counselling. Career guidance is a purposeful activity with goals, strategies, and tactics, although the counselling and career theories on which these interventions are based do not always present themselves as theories of goal-directed processes.
- 7 When we look closely at these definitions of vocational guidance, we realize that evaluation is not simply a matter of examining the outcome of this or that intervention. To adequately carry out the processes described in these definitions, the counsellor and client must be engaged together in goal-directed processes in which both parties continuously evaluate the processes as they engage in them. Furthermore, the evaluation of career guidance is not limited to what a particular counsellor and client do. It

encompasses the broader system in which different levels, for example, familial, programmatic, institutional, and cultural levels, can be examined. However, in a case such as this one, when evaluation of goal-directed processes and outcomes range from the individual to the cultural, then we recognize the need for a conceptualization that integrates these levels and the various processes and outcomes of vocational counselling itself. For example, the interventions of a group of counsellors who work at the same counselling centre can be seen as a part of the goal-directed activity of a super-ordinate system; in this case, the services provided by the centre. Here the institutional processes contribute to an action system in the same way as the client-counsellor processes contribute to action system. Thus, the institutional processes are subject to a comparable evaluation perspective. Obviously, each scientific evaluation specifies the action system within which these results make sense, such as a particular approach, a professional discipline or an institution. What would be evaluated are the joint projects of the relevant groups utilizing explicit criteria.

- 8 The definitions of career guidance lead us to suggest that a broad understanding of evaluation of vocational counselling and career guidance is needed. This understanding should be conceptually grounded, look at process and outcome, and be able to address evaluation beyond the dyadic level of counsellor and client. In this article, we propose that contextual action theory provides this needed and integrative framework to evaluate the processes and outcomes of vocational counselling and related interventions (see also Valach & Wald, 2002, and Young & Valach, 2008). Before presenting the action-theoretical view, we expand on a number of challenges that the evaluation of vocational counselling presents, which are subsequently addressed in our action theoretical formulation.

## The challenges of evaluation

- 9 Shadish and Luellen (2005) see evaluation as “an essential human activity that is intrinsic to problem solving” (p.183). As such, one can easily imagine a range of issues that arise in its practice. Among the pertinent issues relative to the evaluation of vocational counselling are the role accorded common sense, the tension between evaluating processes and outcomes, how meaning is represented, how quality is judged, and the place of the intentionality of human agents.

### Evaluation as common sense

- 10 If evaluation is an essential human activity as Shadish and Luellen (2005) suggested, it readily follows that it should correspond to everyday thinking and experience where we constantly assess our own deeds and those of others. However, vocational counselling and guidance theory and research are not captured by the phrase “everyday thinking”. Until recently, experts in the field did not consider everyday thinking as particularly relevant for theorizing and conducting empirical research (Misgeld, 1983; Peavy, 1992).
- 11 Vocational counselling is based substantially on a conception of professional practice and science, which stands in contrast to the everyday thinking of lay people. Nevertheless, professional counsellors, researchers, and other practitioners have a very ambivalent relationship to everyday thinking. They find it present in their clients’ discourse and actions, but it is not well represented in theory and research.

- 12 While scientific discourse is very often directed against common sense or popular beliefs (Bloom & Weisberg, 2007; Derksen, 1997; Hargreaves, 1980), it also relies on them and uses their persuasive and self-evident powers. For example, we know that according to the generally accepted proposition of falsification in science, validation reasoning is not accepted, that is, we are not able to prove that something is right (Popper, 1963). However, professionals generally pretend that they can, as it otherwise would be against popular expectations and would likely damage the social legitimacy of their professional disciplines. In addition, in many empirical approaches which abstain from comprehensive theorizing, hypotheses are often based on the everyday experience of the researcher. Self-evident everyday reasoning is also relied on in the case of the evaluation of professional theories and programs such as counselling interventions. In other words, there are no general theories of processes of which evaluation is a part in regard to counselling interventions. These processes are only considered in methodological terms as a measurement procedure. It seems equally strange that we recognize certain theories as valid, on the one hand, but maintain that interventions based on them are not evidence based until the interventions are proven effective, on the other. This is just one example of what Hammersley (1995) described as the difficult relationship between theory and evidence.
- 13 The debate over evidence-based treatments is reflective of these issues. Efficacy and effectiveness studies have an appeal to common sense, that is, that the desired outcome is a direct effect of the intervention. However, these studies rarely address the one-to-one reasoning that is implied by them. Evaluating vocational counselling is not analogous to evaluating the repair of an automobile. Counselling is different and substantially more than what is captured in a simple instrumental cause and effect relationship. Thus, an integrated approach to the evaluation of vocational counselling has to reflect everyday thinking and, at the same time, account for theory and empirical research. Additionally, we expect that everyday thinking will be represented in descriptions of actions, projects, and career, but not in their explanations.

### Evaluation of both processes and outcomes

- 14 Another debate in the field of counselling generally is whether evaluations should focus simply on outcomes, or whether it should include processes as well. For example, Holland (1996) suggested that society is interested in outcomes not processes in vocational counselling. Clearly, the focus on the evaluation of outcomes is supported by efforts to establish evidence-based practice as the gold standard for practitioners. Others maintain restricting evaluation to outcomes is the wrong approach because it does not pay enough attention to the dynamics of counselling (Levitt, Butler & Hill, 2006; McLeod, 2000; Rennie, 1994; Toukmanian & Rennie, 1992; Wampold, 1997). As well, the evaluation of outcomes is often linked to quantitative evaluation, where assessing the dimension of meaning is difficult. Hammersley (1995) showed that some of the traditional problems of the relationship between theory and evidence could be addressed successfully in qualitative research. However, this position is implicitly supported by the assumption that all ethical and responsible counsellors evaluate as they go along, using a range of criteria including those informed by common sense. The importance attributed to common sense is enhanced further by the fear that quantitative evaluation will not address criteria of meaning and worth. In order to soften the hard boundaries between

these two attitudes, that is, evaluation based on common sense and traditional quantitative evaluation, we look back at the roots of the division between research and evaluation and then propose a new integrative approach.

## Research and evaluation as separate domains

- 15 Research and evaluation have often been thought of as separate domains, in which the former generates knowledge for its own sake, and the latter, embedded in particular social, political, and economic contexts, uses the criterion of worth. Although these domains developed separately, they are closer today where research methods are used in evaluation and evaluation is seen as an important part of research programs. Clearly, the criterion of worth that evaluation brings with it is important to vocational counselling. Furthermore, this criterion opens the door to our consideration of *qualia*, which Jackson (1982) described as those features of our experience that, to a degree, are ineffable. For example, if a person has never experienced first hand being understood deeply in counselling, he or she may find it difficult to describe what it is like, even though able to enunciate the characteristics of empathy. No amount of information suffices for the experiential knowledge of a phenomenon. *Qualia* has been conceptualized as being different from natural phenomena, that is, it refers to a quality. Taken to the next step, *qualia* can be seen as not only the sensed and perceived quality from the subjective point of view, but also captured in the social meaning that is part of shared social knowledge, and the understanding of vocational counselling from the systematic perspective of professionals. Evaluation suggests judging in light of the criterion of quality. The challenge of proposing an integrated view is to bring the natural phenomena of vocational counselling together with aspects of consciousness suggested by *qualia* and represented in the intentionality of actors, individually, jointly, and as professionals.
- 16 Intentionality implicitly joins natural phenomena to goals and thereby to worth. Haugeland (1987) referred to intentionality as “aboutness” when mental processes point to phenomena outside of themselves. The processes and outcomes of vocational guidance are pointed to by those involved in them and those who observe them. Intentionality also serves to integrate *noema*, and *noesis*, that is, an experienced phenomenon such as the vocational counselling interview and its mode of being experienced such as the interview being experienced as relating, empathizing, or interpreting (Sharoff, 1995). Integrating a professional-scientific view with *qualia* and intentionality, presented here very briefly, took a long time to develop in the philosophy of science and is still only seldom encountered in educational and vocational guidance research and evaluation. They may not appear central for developing counselling interventions but they are central for the integration of the various conceptualizations in counselling theory and research, intervention, and ultimately, their evaluation.

## An integrated approach to the evaluation of vocational counselling

- 17 The integration of theory and practice in vocational counselling continues to be a challenge, despite recommendations as to how their amalgamation may be strengthened (Walsh & Savickas, 1995). When evaluation is added to this mix, as of course it must be, the challenge is keener. Our view is that the intentional stance including *qualia*,

intentionality, *noema* and *noesis* can serve as a point of departure for addressing this challenge. It led us to develop an integrative model. Specifically, our response to the issue of evaluation in vocational counselling is to propose contextual action theory which conceptualizes joint goal-directed systems in form of action, project and career (Young, Valach & Collin, 1996, 2002; see also Young & Valach, 2008). This theory of career is based on the notion that the common experience of people is that their own and other people's behaviour is understood as, and in units of, goal-directed action. This experience applies equally in vocational counselling and career guidance as it does in people's lives more generally. This framework for how people understand and make sense of human behaviour looks to the goals of action and other action processes rather than the causes of behaviour for understanding. It is well documented that naïve, non-professional observers describe ongoing human processes in terms of goal-directed actions (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). The assumed or understood goal helps observers define a unit of action with a beginning and an end. Such a unit can also be the focus of professional observers and scientists. Moreover, the importance goals have in people's everyday thinking suggests that tacit theories of goal-directed action are used to understand observed behavior. This also is the case when vocational and career issues are concerned.

- 18 In a systemic view of human action addressed in contextual action theory, we recognize that evaluation is a part of both regulation processes and the control and steering of action. Furthermore, in a social or a shared view, intentionality is captured by descriptive and evaluative concepts which are interwoven in meaningful narratives. In this way, evaluation is an inherent part of the conceptualization of goal-directed processes at various levels. Thus, evaluation can benefit from an approach that incorporates such a conceptualization. Moreover, we propose that this view should also be adopted in conceptualizing not only the research and evaluation processes but also the vocational counselling processes we study (see, for example, Young, Valach & Collin, 2002). In doing so, we offer the possibility of merging evaluation with these ongoing processes, making evaluation an integrated part of them. These discussions are not new in scientific discourse or in the vocational counselling literature. Rather, heretofore they have been framed differently. For example, consider the traditional dispute between the objective and subjective conceptions of science (Husserl, 1970), between explanative and understanding approaches (Fred, 1986; Greenwood, 1987; Griesmaier, 2006; von Wright, 1971), between political and value neutral approaches on the one hand and political activism or value adhering approaches on the other (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997), between social and individualistic propositions (Burge, 1979; Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001; Howarth, 2001; Putnam, 1975; Schein, 1996), between methodological monism and methodological pluralism (MacMartin & Winston, 2000; Slife & Gantt, 1999), between essentialist and constructivist views (Sayer, 1997), among others.

### Action, project, and career

- 19 The everyday understanding of human behaviour is not limited to discrete actions. It extends to longer periods of time, using the constructs of project and career. Action itself refers to the short-term intentional goal-directed behaviour of persons. Cooking a meal might consist of one or more goal-directed actions. A counselling session with a client might consist of one or more joint goal-directed actions. When several discrete actions that occur over a mid-length period of time are constructed as having common goals, we



consider them a project. Adhering to a special diet for a period of time might be considered a project. Counselling involving several sessions with a client and perhaps with others concerned in the client's life might be understood as a joint project. When projects coalesce over a long period of time and have a significant place in one's life, then we can speak of career. For example, in an interview with *New Vegetarian and Natural Health* magazine, the rock musician Bryan Adams maintained that the book, *Fit for Life*, "became my sort of bible in terms of my vegetarian career" ([http:// www.badfan.info/art/art9.htm](http://www.badfan.info/art/art9.htm)). A counselling project might become an important part of the vocational career of the client and the work with a particular client might become an important episode in the career of the counsellor. Thus, the constructs of action, project, and career, while not always used explicitly in this way, are represented in the conventional everyday descriptions of ongoing behaviour and in the subjective reports of the persons engaged in them. We can also observe these processes in a systematic manner.

### Joint goal-directed action

- 20 Guichard and Huteau (2005) recognized that the problems of vocational guidance (*l'orientation*) arose in social contexts, but have been transformed to questions based on the relation of the individual to various occupational and educational phenomena. The conceptual link between action, project, and career that we suggest shifts the focus of the evaluation of vocational counselling from personality traits, decisional processes, and other characteristics of the individual to significant and common joint and social processes, reaffirming Guichard and Huteau's identification of the source of vocational guidance issues. These joint and social processes refer to the joint actions of those involved in them and the embedding of these actions in socially constructed projects and careers. Joint actions encompass the individual intentions a person may bring to the action as well as the intentions that are generated with the action. Shotter (1993) suggested that joint action captures an intentionality that is not fully accounted for by the individual intentions of the participants. It is important to keep in mind that when talking about actions, projects, and career, we always imply three perspectives to understand them—the social perspectives of lay persons, the subjective view of the participants, and the systematic view of professionals. Joint processes are critical in the evaluation of vocational counselling, as Schultheiss (2003) recognized that relationship, while being important in life, is also of preponderant importance in vocational counselling. The evaluation of goal setting and goal maintaining processes have to be derived from a careful analysis of what is implicitly and experientially going on in joint actions and projects. These processes and the suggested analysis clearly indicate the shortcomings of the traditional goal analysis in the experimental project literature (Little, Salmela-Aro & Phillips, 2007), in which any goals, even those outside of the context of the action situation, are considered. The goals an individual may conjure up that are disconnected from action will gain meaning only to the extent that they extend and are constructed through joint action, project, and career. Conversely, goals that are embedded in joint actions have the potential of constructing project and career. These considerations about the concept of goal are important. A too unspecified use of the concept of goal can backfire as has been shown in regard to the retrospective naming of goals (Nisbett, & Wilson, 1977), and to assuming conscious goals at a low level of motor action where other mechanisms are more important (Wegner, 2002).



## Career

- 21 Guichard and Huteau (2005) noted that career, in action theory, can be defined as, “la construction et la combinaison [coalescing] des actions dans le long terme dans un certain context social et culturel” (p.61). In addition, this long-term construction, which itself is an active joint and social process, is dependent on having mid-term length projects which come together to form career. In turn, projects are only possible when we can see that relevant actions are associated through common and hierarchically-linked goals.
- 22 In this understanding, career is not necessarily confined to the occupational career which has been the focus of much of the research in career and vocational counselling. This framework suggests that long-term, life-sustaining goals can and are found in other areas of life. Career is not simply an occupation or a series of occupations. Rather, *career* is a construct that reflects our efforts to make sense, not only of specific aspects of our lives, but also of actions and joint projects over the long-term. It is used or implied by naïve observers of ongoing behavior, by those involved in careers, as well as a professional term used in the analysis of long-term organization of individual and joint behavior also indicating substantial involvement and the inclusion of social institutions.

## Project

- 23 The understanding of action and career and their relationship in contextual action theory makes possible a third construct in this temporal sequence, that of project. To follow Guichard and Huteau’s (2005) suggestion that career represented the long-term coalescing of action in a certain context, project represents the mid-term construction of action around particular goals in a given context. We have argued that project is a particularly relevant construct for vocational psychology (Young & Valach, 2006). Clearly the construction of long-term meaning is dependent on the shorter-term meaning, and thus, project becomes a heuristic construct for both the practice and evaluation of career guidance. Indeed, many clients can much more readily address issues pertinent to the life projects in which they are engaged, than they are able to address long-term career. At the same time that is not to say that a life-enhancing career is not possible. Knowing its composition, however, is critical to recognizing its possibility and to evaluating it (see Young & Valach, 2008, for a discussion of the life-enhancing career).

## Steering, Control, and Regulation

- 24 The processes through which action, project, and career are realized include steering, control, and regulation. Cognitive and affective regulation is commonly understood in psychology, that is, as persons act, they steer their action based on their thoughts and feelings (Gollwitzer & Schaal, 2001). As such, regulation, including steering and control processes, represents important components in the evaluation of vocational counselling. In addition, action is socially influenced. In the case of joint actions, the steering, control, and regulation of action reflect communicative—in the case of regulation often non-verbal—as well as internal processes. Finally, action also includes specific conscious and unconscious behaviours that the person uses in engaging in the action. This is where the

regulation processes can be found. Thus, action theory is neither a regulation nor a control theory exclusively. Next to feedback, it focuses on feed-forward processes. Steering is a top-down process while regulation often proceeds from the bottom up. We all remember the exclusive use of these concepts. The psychology of steering (Bruner, 1973; Christensen & Hooker, 2000; Goldfield, 2000; Heylighen, Rosseel & Demeyer, 1990; Jeannerod, 1994), the psychology of control processes (Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985; Powers, 1989, 1992; Wiener, 1948), and the regulation theories (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004, Carver & Scheier, 1998) all had their heydays. However, these processes occur at the same time, are complementary, and are encountered at different levels of the action organization (Valach, Young & Lynam, 2002).

## Goals, Functions, and Elements

- 25 The evaluation of vocational counselling is further enhanced when the conceptual system that undergirds it considers how action, project, and career are organized. Specifically, action can be seen from the perspective of meaning, of internal and communicative processes, and of the behaviours that comprise the action and the resources, for example, the availability of counsellors, used to undertake it. Meaning is captured through the goals that an action, project or career has. From the perspective of an individual, meaning is reflected in subjective goals. In systematic observation, one can speak about meaningful action, and from a social perspective, we rely on the social convention of goal attribution to determine meaning. Thus, the members of the same communication community while observing behavior of others will attribute a goal of the action to them based on their cultural understanding which has the same root as the participants' goal. Action theory recognises that the social dimension of human action has a significant role in how meaning or goals are constructed. The second perspective on action, projects and career involves the internal or communicative processes in which persons engage in steering and controlling them. From the perspective of the person engaged in them, these processes can be thought of as sub-goals. As part of the systematic observation of action, these processes are best described in functional terms. For example, we could describe a counsellor's action in functional terms as "helping the client in her perception of her goals related to her identity." This is the function of the counsellor's response and stands in contrast to counting the number of words the counsellor uttered or that the counsellor made a positive assessment of the client's communication style. Finally, action, project and career can be seen from the perspective of the behaviour that the person engages in, described in physical and structural terms, and the structural, for example, the time that a counsellor has for counselling, and personal, for example, the counsellor's expertise with certain types of clients, resources as well as unconscious processes that support or detract from that behaviour. The processes of regulation can be described here. The systematic observation uses physical measure in describing the structural features of behavior.

## A two-dimensional representation of career, career counselling, and evaluation

- 26 We are now able to illustrate the contextual action theory as a two-dimensional representation of the systems of goal-directed processes, that is, action, project, and

career as one dimension, and the levels of action organization, that is, meaning, functional processes, and behavior, including resources as the second dimension (Figure 1). This figure indicates the relation among action, project, and career, that is, actions lead to projects, which in turn lead to careers. The second dimension reflects the way action, project and career are organized. Each of action, project, and career is organized at the level of meaning, that is, each is represented by the goals for each level, including the joint goals for projects and careers. Internal and social processes, that is, one's thoughts, feelings, as well as communication with others, steer action projects and careers, which are represented in the second row of the figure. Finally, actions, projects, and career are comprised of specific behaviors, conscious as well as unconscious, and supported or not supported by structural resources, and for which skills, habits, and regulation are important.

Figure 1

	Goal-directed actions	Project	Career
<i>At the level of meaning (steering)</i>	Engaging in tasks related to working	Working as a salesperson	Having a full working life
<i>At the level of control processes</i>	Collecting information about the tasks	Keeping up with the occupation	Transitions between positions/jobs
<i>At the level of unconscious and conscious behaviour, structural support, resources (regulation)</i>	Availability of time in order to get started	Communication skills and habits for being a salesperson	Long-term good health to support a full working life

Systems and levels of action (with examples from working life)

- 27 Figure 1 can represent the application of contextual action theory for domains of career (career development, vocational choice), career counselling and guidance interventions, and evaluation. The challenge of identifying the components of each cell of the figure is substantial, and, of course, would vary by particular actions, projects or careers. Elsewhere, we have suggested components for the cells of the figure for a life-enhancing career, which at this stage are hypothetical (Young & Valach, 2008). For example, it is likely that for a project that would lead to a life-enhancing career, joint undertakings would likely involve positive feedback. This aspect could be included in the project column and the level of steering process of Figure 1. But the conceptual framework and the cells of the figure may serve in addressing any issue related to the identified domains. A counsellor may use the model in assisting a client identify the source of a vocational problems, for example, at the goal level, at the level of how the client is processing cognitive and affective information about relevant actions, and at the level of the client's resources, strengths, and skills. It would be particularly pertinent if the current research literature on vocational counselling specifically was reviewed to identify the already

known components of this representation, and future research address domains that are less clear.

## Evaluation methods

- 28 We have already suggested in this article that evaluation occurs continuously and is part of the regulation process. The means of evaluation are enhanced when we can use the systems and levels of action identified in Figure 1, even in one's everyday actions as well as in our professional encounters. In addition, we have developed and used a research method, known as the action-project method, that reflects the proposed approach (Domene & Young, 2008; Valach, Young & Lynam, 2002; Young, Valach & Domene, 2005). Three aspects of the method, the unit of analysis, the data gathered, and the analysis, set it apart from more traditional methods.
- 29 The unit of analysis in the action project method is the action, project, or career. This is in contrast to the individual who often comprises the unit of analysis in traditional research and evaluation. For example, in a recent study (Young, *et al.*, 2008), the unit of analysis is the joint project undertaken by a parent and youth pertinent to the youth's transition to adulthood. The focus is on neither the parent nor the youth themselves, but in their joint on-going action in the form of a transition-to-adulthood project.
- 30 The action-project method expects that the data gathered reflect the perspectives on action, that is, manifest behaviour, internal processes, and social meaning. In our studies of a range of vocational projects in counselling and in families (Young, *et al.*, 2006), we used video-recording to capture the behaviour of those involved in the action, for example, a parent-adolescent conversation about the adolescent's future. We gathered data about internal processes, that is, the thoughts and feelings that the participants use to steer their action, through playing back the video of the manifest behaviour and asking the participants to recall thoughts and feeling as the action occurred. Finally, we gathered data on the social meaning of the action by encouraging participants to comment on the action and project. Members of the research team from the same cultural and language communities also provided information about the meaning of particular actions. Repeated use of these procedures as well as self and researcher monitoring by telephone allowed us to follow actions across time that coalesced as projects. While these are the procedures we have used, the use of contextual action theory as a framework for evaluation is not limited to them. The principle is to gather data from the three sources: manifest behaviour, internal processes, and social meaning. There are many examples in both the quantitative and qualitative research literature where one or other of these sources has been used as the data source. Daily diaries (Butler, Grzywacz, Bass & Linney, 2005), self-assessment forms (Glaser, van Os, Portegijs & Myin-Germeys, 2006), behavioural observations (Latham & Wexley, 2006) are but a few examples of ways that data from one or other of the three perspectives can be gathered. The challenge is to bring them together in reference to the same phenomenon.
- 31 The analysis of action-project data depends initially on the way in which the issue under investigation is conceptualized and the research questions posed. The phenomenon has to be conceptualized as goal-directed action, for example, in our research, parent-adolescent conversations about the adolescent's future are conceptualized as goal-directed actions/ project. In the case of vocational counselling, the counsellor-client actions over time are seen as a joint project. The analysis we have engaged in consists of

describing these phenomena from the perspective of conceptual action theory. The analysis itself is conducted as a top-down and a bottom-up manner. Initially, broad intentional frameworks and goals are identified, then specific verbal and non-verbal behaviours are coded that contribute to functional steps. Subsequently, the functional steps contribute to the bottom-up understanding of the goal of the action and/or project.

## Application of an action perspective to evaluation of vocational counselling

- 32 We are now in the position to apply the action theoretical perspective to the issue of the evaluation of vocational counselling. The definitions of career guidance and *l'orientation*, cited above, indicate that there are always assumptions about what clients' lives should be like following counselling interventions. These assumptions form an important part of devising and conducting any intervention. However, if they are not reflected in the intervention, we end up relying on naïve normative reasoning not supported by theoretical explications, that is, an intervention must be good if it seems to work even if we don't understand why it does or appreciate the processes important to its effectiveness. Guichard and Huteau (2005) argued that the evaluation of vocational guidance depends on the *a priori* abstract reflection on the objectives of the intervention. This expectation is the first step in the case for an integrated conceptual framework for the evaluation of vocational guidance. An examination of the outcomes of vocational counselling is the first step in understanding the relationship between the assumptions that guide counselling and its outcomes.
- 33 The research literature suggests that career counselling is effective (Oliver & Spokane, 1988; Whiston, Sexton & Lasoff, 1998). The measures and the effect sizes reported in Whiston *et al.*'s meta-analysis, indicate the significant outcomes of career counselling (listed in Table 1, adopted from Whiston *et al.*). However, it is important to note that most of these outcomes are, in effect, processes that are expected to lead to subsequent vocational outcomes. These outcomes/processes include accuracy of self-knowledge, career-related knowledge, career decision-making self efficacy, anxiety, career information seeking, and career maturity. The more explicitly career outcomes are adjustment and securing/probability of hire. Of particular interest is the order of the effect sizes of counselling interventions on specific vocational measures. The magnitude of processes influenced by career counselling give us a hint on what matters in career-related projects. Self-knowledge, career related knowledge, skills, goals, emotional balance, general adjustment and factual institutionally anchored results, that is, being or having a high probability of being hired, illustrate the systems impacted by career counselling. These processes could make up a rudimentary mid-range goal-directed process, which we describe as a project. And indeed, self knowledge and career-related knowledge are important prerequisites of successful actions, projects, and career. We see in these processes steering (goals), control (and related skills), and regulation (mostly related to emotional balance), which are the key dimensions of goal-directed systems in joint actions, projects, and career. General adjustment and institutionally anchored results are the outcomes of vocationally relevant actions and projects. Thus, the meta-analysis of relevant outcome measures impacted by career counselling reflects a system of processes that could be well summarized in the conceptualization of goal-directed systems which we describe in contextual action theory as actions, projects and careers.

Table 1/Table 1

Outcome measures	Mean effect size
1. Accuracy of self knowledge	1.40
2. Skills (career related knowledge)	1.30
3. Career decision-making self-efficacy	0.99
4. Anxiety	0.89
5. Career related knowledge	0.88
6. Adjustment	0.84
7. Securing job or probability of hire	0.73
8. Career information seeking	0.69
9. Career options	0.58
10. Career maturity	0.55

Effect Size for Various Outcomes as a Result of Career Counselling (adopted from Whiston *et al.*, 1998)

- 34 Career maturity, a developmental construct, while still impacted by career counselling, did not seem to capture the main changes that resulted from these interventions (Whiston *et al.*, 1998). Indeed, Crites (Crites & Savickas, 1996) abandoned the developmental frame for career maturity and adopted a cognitive theory of goal-directed thinking in cognitive-emotional processes. This approach integrated the top down steering approach (coping) made popular at that time by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Subsequent developments in cognitive approaches generally, for example, regulation theory (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004), while generally significant are often difficult to appreciate in a professional culture which grew up on decision-making models such as career decision. Other attempts at integrating aspects of career maturity, for example, chaos theory (Pryor & Bright, 2003a, 2003b) or systems theory (Patton & McMahon, 1999) have not been successful in observing or describing process involved in career maturity or interventions intended to enhance it. Savickas (2001) in proposing an integrated alternative to career development based on career maturity recognized the importance of a category that addresses action in career theory, and implicitly decried the lack of truly process models. In response, the proposed contextual action theory integrates steering, control and regulation processes in a hierarchically organized system of goal-directed processes seen as part of people construct their lives daily. However, it does not give developmental concepts first priority.
- 35 More important than the criticism of the concept of career maturity is recognizing that the goals and aims of career counselling require a conceptualization and reformulation. Super's development of the *Career Development Inventory* (Super, Thompson, Lindeman,

Jordaan & Myers, 1981) and Crites's (1978) development of the *Career Maturity Inventory* represented great leaps forward in progressing toward a career counselling evaluative instrument. However, efforts to develop a valid measure of career counselling are not yet finished. Ultimately the challenge is to be able to address the difference between a judgment attitude and an action attitude. It is only the latter which is relevant to action in a clear way. However, to monitor action attitudes we need different empirical methods than those used in monitoring judgment attitudes such as questionnaires. The proposed contextual action theory extensively deals with how to empirically assess attitudes about action in conjunction with other action processes (see Young, Valach & Domene, 2005).

- 36 The meta-analysis of career interventions by Whiston and colleagues (Whiston, Sexton & Lasoff, 1998) raises a number of other issues relative to the evaluation of vocational counselling. For example, while they suggested that individual counselling is efficacious and effective, they also maintained that the process and outcome indicators are not very specific and need more research. This argument leads us to suggest that it is important to conceptualize both counselling and career processes in order to identify and develop target indicators for their meaningful measurement as well as the measurement of their outcomes. To take a specific example, it is not clear what contributes to the effectiveness of vocational counselling. In contrast to psychotherapy research where the focus is often on process and outcome, in career research we know very little about the interaction between them (Blustein & Spengler, 1995; Meier, 1991; Spokane, 1991). Whiston *et al.* concluded, "[w]e hope that additional research is initiated, for without extensive process research, it will be difficult to identify pertinent treatment factors" (p.160).
- 37 We propose that the conceptualization of the counselling as joint actions and projects will help in planning and executing the kind of research Whiston and her colleagues (1998) suggested is needed. For example, it is not enough to know that personal contact or unspecified relationship factors are important in counselling, without understanding their place in a comprehensive system. Simply stated, it is not the number or duration of eye contact or head nodding that make the largest difference. Rather, it is the joint project of counsellor and client in which the identity and emotional goals are responded to and joint goals are followed that helps us understand the process to which Whiston *et al.* referred. We also need a framework in which less expensive interventions such as computer-aided information processing, media-aided work on clients' emotional issues, and media-aided self monitoring of the clients can be integrated. The contextual action theory approach to career counselling also attends explicitly to the intent of the intervention or counselling, thus reflecting Whiston *et al.*'s observation that "larger effect sizes are associated with the appropriate matching of the outcome measure with the intent of the treatment and the developmental level of the clients" (p.161).

## Conclusion

- 38 We began this article by referring to the call for evidence-based evaluation of interventions. We suggested that evaluation has learned something from research. Indeed, we cited a proposal of marriage between clinical expertise and external clinical evidence from systematic research (Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes & Richardson, 1996). Supporting such an integration of evaluation and research, we then suggested that this integration would have to be substantial and require further and deeper discussion.



- 39 A critical factor in evaluating vocational guidance interventions is the intent of the intervention. This intent is not realized solely by the counsellor or the client, but jointly and reflects the goal-directed processes in which they are engaged. Contextual action theory conceptualizes these processes in the form of action, project, and career. Similarly, the changes that have been shown to result from vocational counselling can well be conceptualized in comparable goal-directed processes. The significant effect sizes of vocational counselling show which processes have the most impact. These are goal-directed processes. Further, we suggested that evaluation as it is understood in conventional research is based on an assumption of higher order processes. Counselling reflects such higher level processes. Similarly, counselling as it is embodied by group, professional, organizational, or institutional processes can be understood in terms of goal-directed processes. These suggestions can be extended to the understanding of career processes prior to counselling as well as the clients' narratives about their vocational and other life-related careers.
- 40 Because counsellors are working as and with human agents, they may be helped in their understanding and support if they complement their causal thinking by a systemic causality notion which pays more attention to goal-directed processes. We are not suggesting abandoning the professional scientific framework, but are proposing that counselling should lean on more modern conceptions of science as discussed in many natural science disciplines such as the neurosciences and less on 18<sup>th</sup> century mechanics.
- 41 It would be unfortunate if the quality of vocational counselling were tied tightly to outcome measures only. In our effort to solve the outcome measurement problems of the vocational counselling, we may kill vocational counselling in the process, just as many therapists say that manualized psychotherapy is not psychotherapy. While one can imagine a surgical method detailed in a standard operating procedures manual, to codify a counselling encounter in the same way might be endlessly more difficult and change it to such a degree that it loses its substance. The solution, as we see, it is to recognize the conceptualization of all the goal-directed systems involved in career guidance and how evaluation is reflected at each of these levels. These systems include the theories of vocational counselling and their evaluation, and thus evidence-based, career research, the education of vocational counsellors, their training and supervision, individual counselling sessions, work with individual clients, assessment at the various stages of the counselling process, work with different clients' groups, counsellors' participation in further education, their work on their own mid-term projects and long-term careers, counselling programs, counselling institutions and organizations, and the specific professional groups of counsellors.
- 42 We put forward the suggestions in this article as an attempt to unify, both conceptually and empirically, scientific outcome and process research as well as the quality assurance studies. While the first two rely on scientific methodology and primarily a causal conceptualization, quality assurance studies follow everyday thinking and describe the specifics of counsellor, client, context, methods, and results. Using contextual action theory described in this article and elsewhere, it should be possible to integrate these views and to substantially advance the discussion about evaluation in vocational counselling.
- 43 We encourage counsellors and researchers to engage in a dialogue among all groups and stakeholders participating at any level or form of vocational counselling. The dialogue must be open and concerns that arise attended to. Evidence-based practice is an

important part of that dialogue. However, we have argued in this article that a much broader conceptualization is required if we are to evaluate vocational counselling in a meaningful way. Our view is that action theory provides an integrative framework for practice, research and evaluation that speaks to all stakeholders.

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## RÉSUMÉS

In the context of current research in, and calls for, evidence-based practice, an action theory perspective is proposed for the evaluation of vocational counselling and other career guidance interventions. The proposition of an action theory perspective, which is based on the common understanding of human experience as being goal-directed, is made in light of several issues in the philosophy of science relevant to evaluation, including the role accorded common sense, the tension between evaluating processes and outcomes, how meaning is represented, how quality is judged, and the place of the intentionality of human agents. The specifics of this integrative approach for evaluation include the continuity of action, project, and career, as well as goals, functional steps, and behavioural and other elements that comprise them. These systems operate in vocational counselling itself, as well as in other systems of which counselling is a part. The research evidence on vocational counselling reflects the goal-directed processes that the perspective enunciates.

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