

A Theory for Everything? Is a Knowledge of Career Development Theory Necessary to Understand Career Decision Making?

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Abstract

Career decisions are complex ones. Whether clients plan their career in a systematic way, carefully considering their options and making an informed choice or build their careers their own way – seizing opportunities, taking chances and profiting from ‘chance’ and serendipity, career guidance professionals need a least a cursory knowledge of career development theory to adequately understand these decisions. As practitioners, we do not work with homogenised groups, we work with individuals – with varying levels of internal and external constraints on career choice. Career decisions are not always made in a considered and informed way. Evidence from Brimrose (2006) suggest that only 25% of the population use a strategic or rational approach to career decision making. In fact, Gladwell (2005) suggests intuitive decision making may be more effective. As Mitchell (2003) attests ‘careers are seldom planned but are often developed by being aware of and acting on the landmarks that appear on the way’ (Mitchell, 2003, p.4). This dichotomy has led to certain amount of ambivalence to career theory from practitioners. Kidd, et al, (1994) found that practitioners were “virtually unanimous in their dismissal of the value of theories of guidance...it was frequently described as ‘airy-fairy’ or ‘wooly’...” (Kidd, et al, 1994, p.391). Closs (2001) argues that practitioners should focus on meeting the needs of clients and not concern themselves with theory. While development theory can attempt to explain the past experiences, quantifying chance and clients ability to profit from it, is more difficult. However, an understanding of career development theory can help us adapt our professional practice to individual need.

Keywords: Career development theory, career choice, career guidance practice

Introduction:

According to Watts (2004) ‘career development is the lifelong process of managing progression in learning and work’ (Watts, 2004, p.1). It is clear that some people build their careers in a systematic way, carefully considering their options and making an informed choice. Equally, many people build their careers their own way – seizing opportunities, taking chances and profiting from ‘chance’ and serendipity. Career decisions are complex ones, influenced by myriad factors, including family background, peer group achievement, cultural norms, personal aptitudes and educational attainment (Korkut-Owen, 2008, Bandura, et al, 2001). Life events can impact dramatically on career decisions and countless factors can change the course of a career. If we accept the slightly utilitarian assumption, proposed by Hodkinson (2008), that the prime purpose for career guidance is to “increase the quality of the career-decision making process, leading to an increase in the number of good decisions, which will lead to less educational wastage and reduce unemployment” then it should follow that these decisions are framed in a considered and informed way. This, however, is not always the case. Evidence from the research conducted for this assignment point to a fluidity in career decisions, influenced by serendipitous events, chance and external/internal pressure. Evidence from Brimrose (2006) suggest that only 25% of the population use a strategic or rational approach to career decision making. In fact, Gladwell (2005) suggests intuitive decision making may be more effective. As Mitchell (2003) attests ‘careers are seldom planned but are often developed by being aware of and acting on the landmarks that appear on the way’ (Mitchell, 2003, p.4). This dichotomy has led to certain amount of ambivalence to career theory from practitioners. Kidd, et al, (1994) found that practitioners were “virtually unanimous in their dismissal of the value of theories of guidance...it was frequently described as ‘airy-fairy’ or ‘wooly’...” (Kidd, et al, 1994, p.391). Closs (2001) argues that practitioners should focus on meeting the needs of clients and not concern themselves with theory.

Given the discourse about the ambivalence of practitioners to theory outlined above, a logical question would be, why do we need theory? Many authors (for example, Kileen (1996)), have argued that a knowledge of theory is essential to help us make sense of experiences – to explain the past and to help us predict the future. On a practical level a knowledge of theory can help us better understand our client’s decision making and make us more confident in our approach. Korut-Owen, et al (2015) contend that career development theories can “reduce a complex range of behaviours to usable explanations, constructs, relationships and, to some extent, predictions” (Korut-Owen, et al, 2015). Krumboltz (1996) contends:

“The purpose of theory is to help us understand a complex domain so that we can take more useful and intelligent actions. A theory enables us to step back from the nitty gritty details and see the big picture. A good theory is a simplified representation of reality, identifying relationships among the most crucial characteristics and ignoring the rest” (Krumboltz, 1996, p.56)

Gothard, et al, (2001) reasons “theory has helped mould the way careers advisors have worked” (Gothard, et al, p.35). Killeen (1996) warns that knowledge of just one theory may blind us to what lies beyond their scope, arguing the importance of practitioners being aware of “*theory*, not merely of *a theory* – enabling them to test against alternatives the implicit theory they bring with them to the profession”(Killeen, 1996, p.26).

I.

Accepting the importance of career theories leaves career guidance professionals with a conundrum when faced with a myriad of diverse career theories – which one should be used? And how do we recognise a ‘good’ career theory? According to Hodkinson (2008), good career theories provide ways of justifying and improving professional career guidance and a method “to evaluate and amend profession and practice” (Hodkinson, 2008, p.2). Hodkinson (2008) continues to state that a good career theory should fulfil two criteria:

- ‘it should be congruent with the ways in which career decisions are and/or could be made and the ways in which careers actually and/or could develop
- It should provide understanding that can valuably inform research, policy and practice’ (Hodkinson, 2008, p.2)

Hodkinson’s (2008) definition of a ‘good’ career theory is useful, but subjective and could be applied to every theory considered for this enquiry. A structured, rational approach to career decisions could be congruent to ways certain individuals make decisions, equally incongruent with other individuals. Indeed, Hodkinson (2008) warns against approaching career decision making “as an abstract logical process rather than examining the complex, messy ways in which career decisions are made” (Hodkinson, 2008, p.3). What follows is a brief examination of both structured and ‘unstructured’ career development theories, their usefulness when applied to professional practice. This examination is by no means extensive (including matching theory, developmental theory, opportunity structure theory, social learning, happenstance theory and psychodynamic theories) and rather than give an in-depth analysis, I have chosen to assess each theory against my own practice.

The matching theory has dominated career guidance since the work of Parsons in the early 1900’s. Zunker (2011) describes trait and factor

theory as the oldest, most widely used and most durable of the career development theories. This rational and structured approach assumes the best way make career decisions is to;

“...first, to assess their abilities, aptitudes, interests and achievements: second, to assess the requirements of particular jobs: and then thirdly, to ‘match’ these two sets of data to achieve the ‘best fit’ between their particular personal profile and a particular job”(Brimrose, Barnes & Hughes 2008, p.32).

Trait and factor theory presumes it is possible to measure individuals’ talents and match them to the requirements of a particular job. The purpose of matching is to get the ‘best fit’ for individuals – in order to increase role performance and productivity (Gikopoulou, 2008). Both Rodgers (1952) and Holland (1966, 1973), like Parsons, view occupational choice as one off events and essentially “rational and largely devoid of emotion” (Gikopoulou, 2008, p.8). Holland (1985, 1992) later expanded his theory and emphasised the influence of environment and heredity on an individual, however the ‘static’ view of a career choice remained consistent. In a world of life-long learning and constantly shifting notions of ‘career’, this static view of career development seems incongruous. However, the influence of trait and factor theories cannot be underestimated – since their inception to the present day, this rational approach to career development has dominated discourse and practice.

Brimrose, Barnes & Hughes (2008), explain the continued popularity of matching theories, citing its ‘practical appeal’. Practitioners have a clear framework for practice, with a clearly defined ‘expert’ role and assessments can be completed within a short time-frame. Matching approaches can also “accommodate the common public perception that careers experts ‘tell you what you should do’”(Brimrose, Barnes & Hughes ,2008, p.32). Gikopoulou (2008) argues that the underlying philosophy of this approach suits policy makers, as “...people perform best in the jobs for which they are best suited. Consequently it has been embraced enthusiastically by policy makers and barely questioned by the majority of practitioners” (Gikopoulou, 2008, p. 10).

Patton and McMahon (2014) have discussed the limited scope of trait and factor theory:

“There is little, if any, consideration given to subjective processes or contextual influences. The process presumes that choice is available for everyone. In addition, career choice is viewed as a single, static, point in time event where there is a single right answer” (Patton and McMahon, 2014, p.32)

Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996) argue that trait and factor theory is useless in the modern labour market. Matching assumes a degree of stability,

taking no account for the volatility of occupations or the requirement on an individual to change and adapt (Gikopoulou, 2008). Zunker (2011) questioned the static nature of the approach and whether occupational choice is a single event. Zunker (2011) was also critical of the failure of the theory to account for growth and change in traits. Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996) also expressed concern at the failure to address change and regarded the theory's failure to explain the process of personality development and its role in vocational selection as its most damning limitation (Osipow and Fitzgerald, 1996, p.104). Zunker (2011) views the over-reliance on assessment results comes at the expense of the counselling relationship. With Sharf (2013) regarding trait and factor theory as “simplest and least sophisticated career development theory that provides few guidelines for counsellors” (Sharf, 2013, p. 433).

Any investigation in to career development theory begins with a cursory look and trait and factor, followed by, at times, a complete dismissal. Clearly career decisions are not as static and structured as this theory would have us believe- career choice is not a single event or decision. The evolving and fluid nature of careers today is completely at odds with notions of ‘matching’. The world of work prescribed by this theory is ordered neatly into occupations, with defined entry points (Watts, 1998). The critiques of the approach far outweigh the positives, and yet it is, perhaps, the most dominate theory in practice. Is this because, as Brimrose, Barnes & Hughes (2008) suggest, of its practical appeal, with practitioners being defined as experts or is a structure approach to career development useful in practice? Careers are no longer about a neat and orderly progression up a hierarchical ladder – Watts (1998) describes how there are fewer ladders around, and those that survive look ‘less and less secure’ (Watts, 1998). Just as there appears to be fluidity in the notions of career, perhaps our ways of choosing these careers could also be flexible.

If we accept the fluid notion of career choice, or in fact that career choice is influenced by chance and constrained by social structures, it becomes easier to explain these choices using developmental theory, opportunity structure theory, social learning and happenstance theory or psychodynamic theories. As discussed previously, there are myriad factors influencing and effecting career decisions and equally a vast array of theories to explain these choices.

The notion that people develop throughout their life stages is not a new one. Ginzberg, et al (1951) proposed three life stages: the fantasy stage, the tentative stage and the realistic stage. Super (1957) expanded on the work of Ginzberg and included information about educational and vocational development. Super developed his work over a fifty year period resulting in a redefining of vocational guidance as; “the process of helping a person to

develop an integrated and adequate picture of himself and his role in the world of work, to test this concept against reality and to convert it into a reality, with satisfaction to himself and to society” (Super, 1988, p.357). Super acknowledged the importance of ‘contextual influences’ (external influences on career choices, such as peer group, family, community and the economy) as being as important as an individuals’ values, needs, interests, intelligence and aptitude. However, Scharf (1997) and Brown (1990) argue that Super’s theories don’t go far enough in acknowledging the external challenges experienced by minorities and women. With Brown (1990) criticising the theory for its failure to acknowledge the particular challenges faced by people from lower socio-economic groupings.

Roberts (1968, 1977) argued that career choice, for many, was constrained by social variables outside their control. Roberts (1968) argued that entry to employment did not take place in the same way amongst all groups of young people, even in the same society. Roberts questioned the autonomy of the individual and ability of guidance practitioners, in a target driven culture, to adequately address the needs of clients who need it most. Out of all the theories researched for this assignment, I have found that Roberts’s theory of opportunity structure resonates most with my professional practice. At a Maslowian level, addressing barriers to employment should be paramount. Working primarily with educationally disadvantaged early school leavers, I can identify with the particular vulnerability of this grouping and also could identify with Roberts (1984) work on the importance of local labour markets on job seeking for young people. Elements of Roberts (1984) theory were evident in the case study, with a reliance on local labour markets and personal networks.

The idea of external influence on career decisions was explored in great detail by Krumboltz in ‘the social learning theory of career development’ (Krumboltz, et al, 1976, Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1990) and more recently in ‘the learning theory of career counselling’ (Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1996). Krumboltz examined the influence of four categories of factors which influence an individual’s ability to benefit or access ‘learning experiences’. Influencing factors include 1. Genetic Endowment and Special Attributes (race/gender/physical appearance & attributes). 2. Environmental Conditions and Events (social, cultural & political/ economic forces/ natural forces). 3. Learning Experiences (Instrumental & associative). 4. Task Approach Skills (work habits/personal standards of performance/ emotional responses). Krumboltz, et al’s, (1976) approach helps us focus on influencing factors, both internal and external that can effect choice. Social structures, race, gender and the economic environment were all factors effecting career choice in the case study. However, the level of constraint external and internal factors have on career choice is more difficult to

quantify. Given similar circumstances, two individuals could act or react in completely different ways. Can we ever make autonomous choices or are we victims of factors beyond our control? Are we victims of our own reactions? Do we even have a ‘choice’? If we have choice, what are the motives, purpose and drives of these choices?

An attempt to examine, understand and utilise our motives, purposes and drives to facilitate career exploration is a central aspect of psychodynamic theory (Watkins and Savickas, 1990). Early childhood experience, our irrational and primitive drives are central features. In addition, Roe (1957) argued that occupation is the most powerful source of individual satisfaction and social and economic status are dependent on it. Savickas (1989) proposed a ‘career-style assessment’ – whereby clients are guided through a structured approach of career assessment and counselling. Watkins and Savickas (1990) argue that psychodynamic theories represent a subjective approach – reliant on an ‘expert’ interpretation of the results. However, they see a value in the psychodynamic approach in ‘complementing’ the ‘objective perspective’ (Watkins and Savickas, 1990, p101). Brown (1990) expressed concern about the accessibility of this approach and that it ignored the importance of social variables and the wider social context. However, when examining this theory in relation to the research question, it is interesting that choice is not always viewed as a rational process – we sometimes make ‘nonsensical’ or illogical choices.

The issue of choice in career development is interesting when we consider the role of chance. Traditionally, chance has been viewed negatively – whereby the individual exercises little or no control over their decision making process (Adams, et al, 1977). However, as practitioners, we have all encountered clients who have benefited from luck, fate or serendipity – evidenced again in the case study. Why do some people seize opportunities and others let them pass by? Can we actively prepare for the unexpected and, in effect, create our own luck?

In an era of career decision making approaches being viewed as reactive and avoidant, rather than pro-active (Adams, et al, 1977), Mitchel, Levin and Krunboltz (1999) proposed ‘planned happenstance’. By engaging in a process of ‘curious enquiry’, individuals can take chances and risks and see where they lead. Being open to new ideas and experiences and having the skills to convert opportunities to your favour are central aspects. In this approach, far from being discouraged, career indecision is seen as a method of exploration. This, of course, has implications for practitioners. Mitchel, et al, (1999) assert that “career counsellors have not been trained to be comfortable with a client who remains undecided for very long” (Mitchel et al 1999). Some clients may believe there is no one right path, and are not adverse to risk. Others, would find this process stressful – with no set plan to

work to, they would struggle to find their way. The ability of practitioners to actively enable clients to generate chance events and overcome obstacles could be of concern. However, as Watts (1998) argues, we also need a ‘sense of direction: a flexible plan we are ready to adapt when unexpected events occur’, without this we risk being simply reactive, waiting for something to turn up (Watts, 1998). In a similar vein, Transition theory investigates the impact of transitions, either planned or unexpected, on individuals. The theory is primarily concerned with how we can cope with the transitions that are a part of our home and working lives. Adams, Hopson & Hayes (1976) proposed a six stage model to describe the effect of transitions. Hopson (1989) expanded the stages and argued that all transitions involve some stress “...including those considered by society to be positive changes” (Hopson, 1989, p.24). Frydenberg (1997) asserts dealing with these changes positively or negatively is dependent on our personality, support systems and the control you feel you have over your life. As Hopson (1989) states:

“...above all there is movement. Nothing and none stays the same. Nature abhors vacuums and stability. A stable state is merely a stopping point on a journey from one place to another” (Hopson, 1989, p. 38).

Conclusion:

Given the range, scope and diversity of career development theories, the ‘ambivalence’ of practitioners is perhaps understandable. Current practices, including the prevalence of matching theory, has garnered criticism from the likes of Krumboltz (1994) who suggests it is having a negative effect on prestige of the profession. Other authors (Mouzelis, 1995, Hodkinson, 2008) contend that the duality in theoretical approaches has led to questions about the place and purpose of theory in professional practice. Given the disparate philosophical positions that underpin career development theory, creating a unified theory seems impossible. Dawis (1994) states “...a unified theory is will-o’-the-wisp” (Dawis, 1994, p.42). Holland (1994) discussed the idea of an integrated theory, stating “It appears more productive to renovate old theories or strategies than to stitch together an integrated theory” (Holland, 1994, p.42). Is it necessary to have an integrated theory? Can career choice be ‘messy’ and straightforward? Both ‘constrained and enabled by client’s perceptions of themselves’ (Colley, 2006)?

Matching theories (e.g. Parson’s, Holland) have a place in career decision making. Evidence from my own practice suggests conducting psychometric assessment began a process of considering choices. If there is no follow-up discussion or, in fact, relationship, it’s a fault of the practitioner, not the theory. In my own professional practice, I use psychometrics as a relationship builder – discussions can begin about what a

client definitely does not want to do, which at times, can be of great assistance in the ‘helping relationship’. Equally, Krumboltz’s social learning theory (1979, Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1990), which examines internal and external influence is of vital importance. The significance of an understanding of the economic, social and cultural context of clients cannot be understated. Similarly, Roberts (1968,1977) work on the social constraints outside our control is influential – how can we plan a career in a straightforward, logical way when social structure impede progress?

When examining career decision making it is clear that although some people plan their career in rational, systematic, comprehensive and methodical manner, others do not (Phillips,1992). People may use logical decisions making, equally they may use “...decision-making strategies that involve emotion and intuition rather than the information and goal setting recommended by career decision-making experts” (Betsworth and Hansen, 1996,pp.91). Super, et al, (1957) argued that non-predicable factors could be determinants of career patterns. Serendipitous career development, these chance encounters, cannot be planned. However our reactions to chance events can, according to Krumboltz and Levin (2004). Just as our past experiences shape our current personalities, past career decisions, peer groups, family background and cultural norms shape our careers.

In the modern context of a constantly changing notions of ‘career’, adaptability appears to be key. While development theory can attempt to explain the past experiences, quantifying chance and clients ability to profit from it, is more difficult. An understanding of career development theory can help us adapt our professional practice to individual need. As practitioners, we do not work with homogenised groups, we work with individuals – with varying levels of internal and external constraints on career choice. Therefore, the concept that there is duality in theory makes more sense. Traditional career paths no longer exist, with individuals now faced with a complex and uncertain career world. In order for theories to be effective, we need to be aware of the world in which post-modern decisions are made (Hambley and Neary-Booth, 2007). An individualised approach is vital in a time where careers are constructed, not chosen.

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