

## CAREER CONSTRUCTION THEORY

Career construction theory provides a way of thinking about how individuals choose and use work. The theory presents a model for comprehending vocational behavior across the life-cycle as well as methods and materials that career counselors use to help clients make vocational choices and maintain successful and satisfying work lives. It seeks to be comprehensive in its purview by taking three perspectives on vocational behavior: the differential, developmental, and dynamic. From the perspective of individual differences psychology, it examines the content of vocational personality types and *what* different people prefer to do. From the perspective of developmental psychology, it examines the process of psychosocial adaptation and *how* individuals cope with vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas. From the perspective of narrative psychology, it examines the dynamics by which life themes impose meaning on vocational behavior and *why* individuals fit work into their lives in distinct ways. In coordination, the three perspectives enable counselors and researchers to survey how individuals construct their careers by using life themes to integrate the self-organization of personality and the self-extension of career adaptability into a self-defining whole that animates work, directs occupational choice, and shapes vocational adjustment.

## RATIONALE

Career construction theory is one of many career theories that seek to explain occupational choice and work adjustment, each interrogating a different aspect of vocational behavior. Career theories that have risen to prominence have done so because they effectively address important questions. For example, the model of person-environment fit emerged early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to address the question of how to match workers to work. The model of vocational development emerged in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to address the question of how to advance a career in one organization or profession. These theories of vocational personality types and vocational development tasks remain useful today when considering how to match workers to work and develop a career in an organization. However, the global economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century poses new questions about career, especially the question of how individuals can

negotiate a lifetime of job changes without losing their sense of self and social identity.

Career construction theory responds to the needs of today's mobile workers who may feel fragmented and confused as they encounter a restructuring of occupations, transformation of the labor force, and multicultural imperatives. This fundamental reshaping of the work world is making it increasingly difficult to comprehend careers with just person-environment and vocational development models that emphasize commitment and stability rather than flexibility and mobility. The new job market in our unsettled economy calls for viewing career not as a lifetime commitment to one employer but as selling services and skills to a series of employers who need projects completed. In negotiating each new project, the prospective employee usually concentrates on salary yet also seeks to make the work meaningful, control the work environment, balance work-family responsibilities, and train for the next job.

While the form of career changes from stability to mobility to reflect the labor needs of post-industrial societies, career construction theory seeks to retain and renovate the best concepts and research from the 20<sup>th</sup> century career models for use in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, instead of measuring personality traits as realist concepts and trying to prove construct validity, the theory concentrates on how individuals use what they have. In replacing scores with stories, career construction theory focuses on how individuals use their vocational personality to adapt to a sequence of job changes while remaining faithful to oneself and recognizable by others. The theory does this by focusing on the meaning that structures an individual's career as it plays out across the ten or more different jobs that a worker today can expect to occupy during her or his work life.

### LIFE THEMES

Career construction theory, simply stated, holds that individuals build their careers by imposing meaning on vocational behavior. Personality types and developmental transitions deal with what a person has done and how they have done it. However, they do not address the question of why they do what they do, nor do they focus on the spirit that animates nor the values that guide the manifold choices and adjustments that build a career. Thus, career construction

theory emphasizes the interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals impose meaning and direction on their vocational behavior. It uses social constructionism as a meta-theory with which to reconceptualize vocational personality types and vocational development tasks as processes that have possibilities, not realities that predict the future. From a constructionist viewpoint, career, or more precisely subjective career, denotes a moving perspective that imposes personal meaning on past memories, present experiences, and future aspirations by weaving them into a pattern that portrays a life theme. Thus, the subjective career that guides, regulates, and sustains vocational behavior emerges from an active process of making meaning, not discovering preexisting facts.

The life theme component of career construction theory addresses the subject matter of work life and focuses on the *why* of vocational behavior. Career stories reveal the themes that individuals use to make meaningful choices and adjust to work roles. By dealing with the *why* of life themes along with the *what* of personality types and the *how* of career adaptability, career construction seeks to be comprehensive in its purview. Although the content of personality and process of adaptation are both important, studying vocational personality and career adaptability as separate variables misses the dynamics that integrate personality and adaptability into a self-defined whole. The essential meaning of a career, and the dynamics of its construction, are revealed in self-defining stories about the vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas that an individual has faced. In chronicling the recursive interplay between self and society, career stories explain why individuals make the choices that they do and the private meaning that guides these choices. From these prototypical stories about work life, counselors attempt to comprehend the life themes that construct careers and understand the motives and meaning that pattern work life.

The life theme component of career construction theory emerged from Donald E. Super's postulate that in expressing vocational preferences, individuals put into occupational terminology their ideas of the kind of people they are; that in entering an occupation, they seek to implement a concept of themselves; and that after stabilizing in an occupation, they seek to realize their

potential and preserve self-esteem. This core postulate leads to the conceptualization of occupational choice as implementing a self-concept, work as a manifestation of selfhood, and vocational development as a continuing process of improving the match between the self and situation. From this perspective on the self, work provides a context for human development and an important location in each individual's life, a place that matters.

The life theme perspective highlights the view that careers are about *matter*ing. Counseling for career construction aims to help clients understand how their life project matters to themselves and to other people. In career construction theory, the theme is what matters in the life story. It consists of what is at stake in that person's life. On the one hand, the theme matters to individuals in that it gives meaning and purpose to their work. It makes them care about what they do. On the other hand, what they do and contribute to society matters to other people. The belief that what they do matters to others sharpens identity and promotes a sense of social meaning and relatedness. What individuals choose to do is the subject matter of vocational personality.

### VOCATIONAL PERSONALITY

Vocational personality refers to an individual's career-related abilities, needs, values, and interests. Individuals form personalities in their families of origin and develop these personalities in the neighborhood and school as they prepare to eventually enter the work world. Before these characteristics are expressed in occupations, they are rehearsed in activities such as household chores, games, hobbies, reading, and studying.

Career construction theory prefers to view interests and other career-related "traits" as strategies for adapting rather than as realist categories. Concepts such as interests should not be reified as factors or traits. They do not reside within an individual and they cannot be excavated from within by interest inventories. They should not be treated as objects by counselors; they are verbs not nouns. Career-related abilities, interests, and values are relational phenomena that reflect socially-constituted meanings. They are dynamic processes that present possibilities, not stable traits that predict the future. From this perspective, individuals can adopt or drop selected

strategies as situations call for them. Of course, long-practiced strategies do coalesce into a tested style. This style can be compared to that of other people to form types or groups, but these socially-constructed categories should not be privileged as anything more than similarities.

Career construction theory asserts that vocational personality types and occupational interests are simply *resemblances* to socially-constructed clusters of attitudes and skills. They have no reality or truth value outside themselves because they depend on the social constructions of time, place and culture that support them. Regulated similarities in work environments produce vocational personality types and occupational groups from among individuals with heterogeneous potentials. Thus, career construction theory regards vocational personality types and occupational interests as relational phenomena that reflect emergent and socially-constituted meanings. For this reason, career construction theory views vocational personality as an individual's *reputation* among a group of people. Accordingly, the theory concentrates on what individuals can become in doing work, not what they are before they go to work. Work, as a context for human development, provides the outer form of something intensely private; it is the bridge between public and private. Crossing the bridge between self and society is called adaptation.

### CAREER ADAPTABILITY

In concert with life themes and vocational personality, the third central component in career construction theory is career adaptability. Life themes guide the expression of personality in work, while the expression itself is managed by the process of career adaptation. Viewing career construction as a series of attempts to implement a self-concept in social roles focuses attention on adaptation to a series of transitions from school to work, from job to job, and from occupation to occupation. Career construction theory views adaptation to these transitions as fostered by five principal types of behaviors: orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement. These constructive activities form a cycle of adaptation that is

periodically repeated as new transitions appear on the horizon. As each transition approaches, individuals can adapt more effectively if they meet the change with growing awareness, information-seeking followed by informed decision making, trial behaviors leading to a stable commitment projected forward for a certain time period, active role management, and eventually forward-looking deceleration and disengagement. For example, an employee begins a new job with a period of growth in the new role, including exploration of the requirements, routines, and rewards of that role. Then she becomes established in the role, manages the role for a certain time period, and eventually disengages from it either voluntarily when further growth readies her to change jobs or involuntarily when organizational changes make her position redundant. In post-industrial economies people do not work at one job for thirty years. New technology, globalization, and job redesign require workers to more actively construct their careers. They change jobs often and make frequent transitions, each time repeating the cycle of orientation, exploration, stabilization, management, and disengagement. The ability to adapt to new circumstances is enhanced by certain coping resources for solving the unfamiliar, complex, and ill-defined problems presented by developmental tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas.

In considering adaptability, career construction theory highlights a set of specific attitudes, beliefs, and competencies – the ABCs of career construction-- which shape the actual problem-solving strategies and coping behaviors that individuals use to synthesize their vocational self-concepts with work roles. The ABCs are grouped into four dimensions of adaptability: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Thus, the adaptive individual is conceptualized as (a) becoming *concerned* about the vocational future, (b) increasing personal *control* over one's vocational future, (c) displaying *curiosity* by exploring possible selves and

future scenarios, and (d) strengthening the *confidence* to pursue one's aspirations. Increasing a client's career adaptability is a central goal in the goal of career construction counseling.

### COUNSELING FOR CAREER CONSTRUCTION

Counseling for career construction begins with an interview that poses a uniform set of questions to a client. The *Career Style Interview* elicits self-defining stories that enable counselors to identify and appreciate the thematic unity in a client's life. In addition to revealing the life theme, data from a *Career Style Interview* also manifest the client's vocational personality and career adaptability.

It is critical that neither the counselor nor the client view the career stories as determining the future; instead, they should view storying as an active attempt at making meaning and shaping the future. The stories guide adaptation by evaluating opportunities and constraints as well as by using vocational personality traits to address tasks, transitions, and traumas. In telling their stories, clients are re-membering the past in a way that constructs a possible future. Clients seem to tell counselors the stories that they themselves need to hear; from all their available stories, they narrate those stories that support current goals and inspire action. Rather than reporting historical facts, individuals reconstruct the past so that prior events support current choices and lay the groundwork for future moves. This narrative truth often differs from historical truth because it fictionalizes the past in order to preserve dispositional continuity and coherence in the face of psychosocial change.

In attempting to discern the life theme while listening to an individual's career stories, counselors and researchers can become disoriented by the numerous particulars of a life. To prevent becoming confused by a client's complexities and contradictions, they can listen not for the facts but for the glue that holds the facts together as they try to hear the theme or secret that makes a whole of the life. Arranging the seemingly random actions and incidents reported in career stories into a plot can be done in many ways. Career construction theory proposes for this purpose that the listener try to hear the quintessence of the stories a client tells. Counselors and researchers approach this task by assuming that the archetypal theme of career construction

involves turning a personal preoccupation into a public occupation. As they listen to a client narrate his or her stories, they concentrate on identifying and understanding his or her personal paradigm for turning essence into interest, tension into intention, and obsession into profession. The progress narrative in the 20<sup>th</sup> century career model that told about climbing the occupational ladder is thus transformed into a progress narrative that tells how individuals can use work to actively master what they have passively suffered and thus move from a felt minus to a perceived plus. Thus, in its counseling application, career construction theory assists clients to fully inhabit their lives and become more complete as they sustain themselves and contribute to their communities.

Mark L. Savickas  
Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine

#### REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

- Guichard, Jean and Janet Lenz. 2005. Career Theory from an International Perspective. *Career Development Quarterly*, 53, No. 1.
- Hogan, Joyce and Brent Holland. 2003. "Using Theory to Evaluate Personality and Job-Performance Relations: A Socioanalytic Perspective." *Journal of Applied psychology*, 88, 100-112.
- Josselson, Ruthellen. 1994. "Identity and Relatedness in the Life Cycle." Pp. 81-102 in *Identity and Development: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, edited by H. A. Bosma, T. L. G. Graafsman, H. D. Grotevant, and D. J. De Levita. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Josselson, Ruthellen. 2000. "Stability and Change in Early Memories Over 22 years: Themes, Variations, and Cadenzas." *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 64: 462-481.
- Holland, John L. 1997. *Making Vocational Choices: A Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments* (3rd ed.). Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Kalleberg, Arne L., Jeremy Reynolds, and Peter V. Marsden. (2003). Externalizing Employment: Flexible Staffing Arrangements in US Organizations. *Social Science Research*, 32: 525-552.

McAdams, Dan P. 1995. "What Do We Know When Know a Person?" *Journal of Personality*, 63, 365-396.

Savickas, Mark L. 1989. "Career-Style Assessment and Counseling." Pp. 289-320 in *Adlerian Counseling: A Practical Approach for a New Decade* (3rd ed) edited by T. Sweeney. Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development Press.

Savickas, Mark L. 2005. "The Theory and Practice of Career Construction." Pp. 42-70 in *Career Development and Counseling: Putting Theory and Research to Work*, edited by S. D. Brown and R. W. Lent. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Super, Donald E., Mark L. Savickas, and Charles M. Super. 1996. "The Life-Span, Life-Space Approach to Careers" Pp. 121-178 in *Career Choice and Development* (3rd ed) edited by D. Brown and L. Brooks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.