

Career Construction Theory: An Introduction

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The global economy of the 21st century, with its digitalization and worker migration, 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 the restructuring of occupations and transformation of the labor force. The theory's response asserts that individuals build their careers by imposing meaning on vocational behavior. From a constructionist viewpoint, career denotes a moving perspective that imposes personal meaning on past memories, present experiences, and future aspirations by patterning them into a life theme. It is the meaning contained in these biographical themes that will equip individuals to adapt to the social changes that are playing out in their work lives. This personal meaning replaces the holding environment once provided by organizations that contained the task of self-integration as it cared for, protected, and interpreted experiences to its employees. Today, it is the life story that holds the individual together and provides a biographical bridge with which to cross from one job to the next job.

Using social constructionism as a meta-theory, construction theory views careers from a contextual perspective that sees people as self-organizing, self-regulating, and self-defining. Relying on its social constructionist epistemology, the theory reconceptualizes both vocational personality types and vocational tasks. It interprets personality types as processes that have possibilities, not realities that predict the future.

It views developmental tasks as social expectations. Career construction theory then uses the concept of life themes to weave together its conceptualizations of vocational personality and career adaptability into a comprehensive theory of both vocational behavior and career counseling. Stated succinctly, the theory holds that individuals construct their careers by using life themes to integrate the self-organization of personality and the self-extension of career adaptation into a self-defining whole that animates work, directs occupational choice, and shapes vocational adjustment.

Vocational personality

Career construction theory defines vocational personality as the constellation of an individual's career-related abilities, needs, values, and interests. The theory discusses personality using the nomenclature and framework of Holland's (1997) RIASEC types because it offers a widely-used language for describing the personological results of an individual's efforts at self-organization of their skills, interests, and abilities. While adopting Holland's language to articulate accounts of personalities and occupations, career construction theory reminds counselors and researchers that the traits constituting RIASEC types are completely decontextualized and quite abstract. It is easy to forget that the traits, especially when denoted with nouns rather than verbs, are really just strategies for adapting. They are dynamic processes that present possibilities, and they should not be reified into realist tools for predicting the future.

Career-related abilities, interests, and values are relational phenomena that reflect socially-constituted meanings and categories that should not be considered as anything more than similarities. Therefore, 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. While vocational personality deals with this self-organization, the second component of career construction theory, namely career adaptability, deals with self-regulation and self-extension of personality into the social environment.

Career adaptability

Career construction theory conceptualizes development as driven by adaptation to an environment and integration into the community. From this perspective, an occupation is a mechanism of social integration, one that offers a strategy for sustaining oneself in society. Careers are constructed by adaptive strategies that implement an individual's personality in an occupational role. This adaptation brings inner needs and outer opportunities into harmony, with the harmonics of a good fit amplifying in present activity the individual's past preoccupations and future aspirations. Adaptation involves adjusting to occupational changes that include mastering vocational development tasks, dealing with work traumas, and negotiating job transitions. Career construction theory views adaptation to these changes as fostered by five principal types of coping behaviors: orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement. These constructive activities form a cycle of adaptation that is periodically repeated as the individual navigates new transitions

Career adaptability denotes an individual's readiness and resources for handling current and anticipated tasks, transitions, and traumas in their occupational roles that, to some degree large or small, alter their social integration. The adaptability dimensions of readiness and resources shape self-extension into the social environment because they

condition the actual coping behaviors that constitute orientation, exploration, establishment, management, and disengagement. They function as self-regulation strategies that govern how individuals engage the developmental tasks imposed by the communities with whom they co-construct their careers.

In considering the dimensions of psychosocial adaptability, career construction theory highlights a set of specific attitudes, beliefs, and competencies – the ABCs of career construction-- that regulate the coping behaviors for implementing vocational self-concepts into occupational roles. The ABCs are grouped into four dimensions of adaptability: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. According to this scheme, the adaptive individual is conceptualized as (a) becoming *concerned* about the vocational future, (b) increasing *control* over that future, (c) displaying *curiosity* by exploring possible selves and future scenarios, and (d) strengthening the *confidence* to pursue one's aspirations.

Life themes

The self-organization of personality and its adaptive self-extension into the community produces a self-defining story. The essential meaning of career, and the dynamics of its construction, are revealed in these self-defining stories about the tasks, transitions, and traumas an individual has faced. Unlike the RIASEC types and adaptability dimensions, career stories fully contextualize the self in time, place, and role and express the uniqueness of an individual. Furthermore, the separate career stories told by an individual are unified by integrative themes that make whole the individual's complex and contradictory experiences by inscribing them with a meaningful coherence and long-term continuity. The theme does not summarize past experiences, rather it

inscribes them with a sense of purpose that provides meaningful coherence and long-term continuity.

Stories are accounts that constitute the self. We talk ourselves into existence as we describe what we like and what we are like. From this perspective on the self, occupational preferences express self-conceptualizations in vocational terminology. Accordingly, entering an occupation is viewed as an attempt to implement a self-concept and the work itself manifests the self-concept, giving it substance and story. Thus work provides a context for human development and an important location in each individual's life, a place that matters.

In listening for the theme in career stories, counselors can become disoriented in the numerous particulars of a life. To prevent this confusion, career construction theory suggests that career practitioners and researchers concentrate on the motif, or controlling passion, that arranges the separate stories into a coherent whole. Arranging the actions and incidents randomly portrayed in career stories into a plot can be done in many ways. Career construction theory proposes for this purpose using the "narrative paradigm" to organize biographical thinking. This perspective for understanding a story and illuminating a life highlights the challenge of the client's life, one that she or he cannot ignore or go around. Career construction theory, applying its narrative paradigm, assumes that the archetypal theme of career construction involves using work to turn preoccupation into occupation, thereby resolving the challenge. Simply stated, careers are constructed as individuals, using adaptability coping strategies, turn their personal preoccupations into public occupations. The researcher or counselor listens to the stories to learn how the individual has used work to turn a personal symptom into a public

strength and then even a social contribution. Using the narrative paradigm as a biographical organizer enables the listener to draw out the silk thread of a life theme from the cocoon of autobiographical stories.

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 that threads through the client's life, data from a *Career Style Interview* also manifest the client's vocational personality and substantiate adaptive strategies. Responding to the interview questions enables a client to hear her or his own story in community. The counselor helps clients to increase the narratability of their stories and to relate their life themes to the choices that they must now make. In discussing the alternative choices and how each one might advance the client's story, the counselor retells the story in a manner designed to increase the client's career adaptability, consider what is at stake, and identify occupations can be used to write the next chapter in their story. Reflecting on and retelling their stories encourages clients to understand how they can use work to become more whole and participate fully in work role that matters both to them and their community.

Further reading

Holland, John L. (1997). *Making Vocational Choices: A Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments* (3rd ed.). Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.

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

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Super, Donald E., Mark L. Savickas, and Charles M. Super (1996). The Life-Span, Life-Space Approach to Careers In D. Brown and L. Brooks (Eds.) *Career Choice and Development* (3rd ed; pp. 1211-178). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.