

An Epistemology for Converging the  
Sciences of Career Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The modern tradition of natural science, built upon a mind-body dualism, has produced a schism between career theorists and practitioners. Each group has proceeded to fashion their own version of science and thus produced knowledge valued in each culture. To advance the career field beyond its current accomplishments requires a repair of the schism between objective and subjective perspectives on knowledge production.

The theory-practice schism in knowledge production and use may be characterized by tensions between epistemic dichotomies such as individualism versus collectivism, objectivity versus perspectivity, universality versus particularity, validation versus legitimation, essence versus context, and concepts versus constructs.

To advance the discipline, career practitioners and theorists could work to resolve epistemic wars by blending the objective and subjective perspectives in constructing career counseling theories based on clinical cases and integrated with models for brief psychotherapy.

## An Epistemology for Converging the Sciences of Career Theory and Practice

### Introduction

Changes attributed to the move to post-industrial society, the information age, postmodern culture, and a global economy have prompted escalating debate about the utility of contemporary theories of vocational behavior for the practice of career intervention (Richardson 1993, 1994; Savickas 1993, 1994; Tinsley, 1994). The schism between career theory and practice has a long history of generating discussion between academics and practitioners. However, currently these discussions resemble heated debates that are widening the schism. Unfortunately, the schism has reached the point where Polkinghorne (1992) concluded that counseling psychology now has two sciences: a science of theory and research performed by academicians and a science of practice.

A series of studies has confirmed the belief that theory is little used by practitioners (Morrow-Bradley & Elliott, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1992). Practitioners need knowledge of how to produce beneficial results in clients. They get it from experience with clients, oral tradition, and emerging research about process of psychotherapy, not from theory and research.

In accord with the growing disenchantment among practitioners, some researchers have also challenged the usefulness of career theory for the practice of career counseling. For example, Fitzgerald and Betz (1994) have recently written about the "general lack of utility of major career theories to large segments of the population." They account for this lack by explaining that the concept of career development may not be a meaningful concept in the lives of the majority of the population, research on theories examines the smallest segment of the population, and theories do not systematically attend to the role of structural and cultural factors in conditioning individual vocational behavior.

### Background of the Problem

Although it may seem like it, the schism between theory and practice has not always been a part of Western Civilization. For example, the citizens of ancient Greece made no sharp division between subjective and objective (Hollinger, p. xv). Admittedly, they had words for theory, practice, and making yet they did not draw strong distinctions between the words. They used the word episteme to denote rigorous science, phronesis to denote prudent view of what was to be done, and techné to denote the skills to do it which were acquired by craftspeople and artists.

The problem of a sharp division between theory and practice emerged with the rise of philosophy and, more importantly, modern science. A pivotal point in establishing boundaries between theory and practice was Descartes' proposal of a mind-body dualism. Descartes' proposal served to advance science by separating it from the Church. Because the mind and body were the domain of theologians, scientists had not been permitted to empirically examine the human body. For example, people believed for centuries, without ever gathering empirical data, that women had more teeth than men. Aristotle had formed this conclusion based on his observation that women talked more than men. The dualism fashioned by Descartes had theologians retain dominion over the mind and soul yet moved the body to the domain of science. On the one hand, this accomplishment freed scientists to empirically study human biology, while leaving the soul to the Church. On the other hand, it began the dichotomy between objective truth about physical nature and subjective understanding of human nature.

Science, as it developed in the modern era and especially during the twentieth century, used the scientific method and principles of logical positivism articulated by the Vienna Circle to produce universal knowledge about physical and biological reality. This epistemology essentially seeks to describe the world as a universe of objective facts independent of the knower.

Following the lead of physical and biological researchers, experimental psychologists also sought to produce analytic knowledge and abstract principle. Accordingly, they followed the lead of their colleagues in using the scientific method to study vocational behavior. They have used reliable measures, sophisticated statistical techniques, and complex theories to extract abstract, generalized principles from studies of large groups of individuals. Today, objective principles regarding occupational decision making and congruence constitute foundational knowledge for the practice of career counseling.

Practitioners need this objective knowledge. In addition to knowing objective facts about vocational behavior, practitioners also need to understand what they are to do with clients. Because empirical science has not and cannot completely address this question (Trigg, 1993), practitioners have turned to an additional way of establishing knowledge and in so doing have initiated an applied science of career intervention. Practitioners seek an interpretive understanding of vocational behavior in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its probable future course and effects. In contrast to uniformities of physical matter, humans add subjective meaning to behavior. In addition to objective truth, there is subjective understanding. Understanding



subjective uniformity in the lives of clients requires that practitioners understand purpose and intention. The scientific method can objectively describe what the client is (i.e., traits and abilities) but it cannot answer the question of which choice the client should make. Client choices are ultimately a matter for decision (values) not demonstration (e.g., test scores). No subjective ought can be derived from an objective is, no value from a fact (McCarthy, 1978, p. 139).

The dichotomy between objective truth about and subjective understanding of clients' vocational behavior may be used to analyze the schism between the two sciences of career theory and career practice. Career theorists use the objective view to focus on conceptions of the client formed by observers whereas career practitioners use the subjective view to focus on apprehending a client's conception of his or her personal experience. Although the English language does not explicitly recognize this distinction, other languages do. For example, in German personlichkeit denotes the actor's interpersonal style and the impression that she or he makes on others whereas personalitat denotes the actor's understanding of the reasons for her or his behavior (MacKinnon, 1944).

#### The Problem

Interest in subjective understanding of clients and their careers has prompted practitioners to pursue a postmodern epistemology (Savickas, in press a & b) that re-emphasizes the goal of science as a guide to praxis. Rather than empirically testing principles to validate abstract theories, perspectivism shifts attention to generating instructive accounts from which counselors extract effective practices. Rather than trying to figure out how to apply theory to practice after accumulating facts, practice-oriented researchers are designing studies with practice and social usefulness in mind. They are investigating "practical intelligence," "best practices," "effective strategies," "critical incidents," and "important events" in career development and intervention.

Perspectivist researchers assert that career practice, using their epistemology, has advanced further than career theory. They further argue, that positivism should be replaced as the superordinate philosophy of science. Perspectivism could serve as the philosophy for a human science. Of course, career theorists and practitioners who adhere to positivism vehemently disagree. Six epistemic issues seem to frame the debate between positivist theorists and perspectivist practitioners concerning the schism between theory and practice:

individualism versus collectivism,  
 objectivity versus perspectivity,  
 universality versus particularity,  
 validation versus legitimation,  
 essence versus context, and  
 concepts versus constructs.

Individualism versus collectivism. Modern positivism proposes that individuals use the scientific method to discover knowledge in the world. Subscribing to a Lockean epistemic individualism, positivists view the individual as the principal agent of knowledge production. In contrast, postmodern perspectivism locates knowledge in relationships between people not in the world. "Emphasis on truth as a relationship suggests seeking meaning contextually in social processes rather than externally in objects" (Jacques, 1992). Because knowledge is mediated through discourse and socially constructed subjectivity, communities, not individuals, are the primary agents of knowledge production (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 83).

Objectivity versus Perspectivity. Modern positivism seeks to discover "the truth" by formulating rational theories and then using the scientific method to test the theories against reality. According to positivists, the scientific method is the universal method because it controls biases and leads to knowledge as well as to prediction and control. Postmodern perspectivists assert that positivistic science produces knowledge from one standpoint not "the" standpoint. Behind modernity's facade of value-free objectivity stands a commitment to technical rationality. Thus, positivism is one empirical method for knowledge production, not the only method. Postmodern perspectivism seeks multiple views in the conviction that more perspectives on a phenomenon produce richer, deeper, and more complex knowledge.

Universality versus particularity. For perspectivists, the search for socially constituted and maintained knowledge shifts research from the generality of testing theoretical principles to the particularity of examining locally situated practices that seem useful in specific circumstances. Perspectivists embrace difference and heterogeneity; they reject global and totalizing concepts as well as abstractions that obscure more than they reveal. The move from universality to particularity involves a transition from seeking solutions to exploring strategies. Instead of designing experiments, postmodern researchers seek stories that report an individual's actual experiences and problem descriptions as well as how she or he eventually responded to and learned from crises, unexpected events, and transitions

(Peavy, 1993). The researcher then attempts to extract from groups of these instructive accounts the effective practices that lead to success in daily living.

Validation versus legitimation. To avoid solipsism, perspectivist research requires a new criterion against which to legitimate knowledge generated from instructive accounts. Positivistic science validates knowledge in reference to theory. In effect, perspectivist researchers have given up the modern project of seeking universal properties that govern human conduct. Because knowledge is produced in diverse interpretive communities that share a local perspective, there are multiple realities not singular truths. Thus, perspectivistic science legitimates knowledge by its usefulness when implemented in action rather than validates it in relation to theory. The modern question asks "Is it true?" Postmodern questions inquire: Why did she say that? How is it true? For whom is it useful? Could it be otherwise?

Essence versus context. Rather than impose general concepts on the world, perspectivist scholars seek to learn how communities construct and maintain meaning in local sites. Accordingly, they emphasize decentration from abstract definitions and essentialized selves toward social context and unique circumstances. They attack the illusion that research participants reflect some universal human nature. Unlike positivists who view context or culture as a variable, perspectivists view culture as the context of meaning. Perspectivists assert that the complex, contextual nature of vocational behavior limits how far positivism can take career psychology. Vocational behavior is not a pure category, it is always intertwined with race, sex, class, and ethnicity.

Concepts versus constructs. Perspectival philosophy of science emphasizes the power of language to shape reality and guide action. We now realize that linguistic concepts and their definitions do not mirror reality, they inscribe meaning. The word "concept" denotes that something in nature was discovered and named. But perspectivist practitioners believe that concepts do not reflect reality directly, concepts re-present reality through the filters of self-chosen vocabulary. Perspectivist scholars use the term "construct" to denote this personal and cultural component of meaning making. The constructs, as opposed to concepts, that individuals use sensitize them to notice certain things and not notice other things. Individuals see what they know and do not see what they have not defined. Ideas and feelings not conceptualized remain inexpressible. Thus, language encapsulates us, words insulate us from



experience, and concepts constrain us within a culture.

#### Paths to a Resolution

To date, the epistemologies of positivism and perspectivism have been typically presented as opposing viewpoints, with theorists preferring positivism and practitioners preferring perspectivism. For example, Forsyth and Strong (1986, p. 118) stated that practice will be best informed by the "energetic application of the scientific model to generate a theory of biological, social, interpersonal, and psychological relationships that specifies how the dynamics of therapeutic and non-therapeutic settings differ." In contrast, postmodern psychologists have noted a growing disuse of theory and claim that practice has advanced further than theory. They prefer perspectivist epistemology because it is so compatible with practice.

Unfortunately, these presentations offer practitioners a either/or choice: positivism or perspectivism. Unlike most people, practitioners cannot rest in the camp of objective knowledge or subjective understanding. Counselors are pragmatists who use counseling models and methods based in both objective truth and subjective understanding. They must not have an indifference to positivism or to perspectivism. They must resolve the tension between the two epistemologies and blend them together in a useful way.

So the real question is not a choice between positivism and perspectivism but rather how practitioners can meld the two sciences (and cultures) of theory and practice. The traditional answer has been to use the fulcrum of technique. However, this answer confuses science and technology in producing an engineering model for career intervention (Bevan & Kessel, 1994). The other, more recent, answer is the scientist-practitioner model. This model hyphenates the two cultures of theory and practice rather than blends them. The answers provided by the engineering and scientist-practitioner models for blending theory and practice cause as many problems as they solve in healing the schism between theory and practice. What else can we try? I have four possible suggestions that may eventually lead to healing the rift:

End epistemic wars

Construct career counseling theories

Emphasize clinical cases as a knowledge source

Integrate career counseling with brief psychotherapy

#### End epistemic wars

We must stop the war between advocates for causal analysis and advocates for interpretive understanding because the resolution lies, not in choosing between the two, but in the search for a higher synthesis. This tension



between theorists and practitioners is precisely the starting point for methodological reflection.

The resolution of theory versus practice war begins with an appreciation for both sciences. Rychlak (1993) argued to promote tolerance concerning what counts as science. He reminded us that the subject matter of psychology, human beings, is complex and thus requires diverse approaches to understanding. Unlike the physical sciences, the human sciences focus on purpose and meaning. Rychlak contended that psychologists have relied too long on a singular explanation, and tried to ignore assumptive differences on which knowledge production can be based.

Rychlak (1993) analyzed four theoretical groundings which he described as predicating paradigms that serve as assumptive influences in framing what psychologists choose to investigate and how they interpret the results. In conducting a study, psychologists first choice or action is selecting a grounding that will be used to conceptualize the findings, what Polkinghorne (1992) called contexts for comprehension. Rychlak contrasted this acknowledgement of assumptive influences that frame topic selection, operational definitions, and conceptual interpretations with "strict positivism, which held that meanings issue exclusively from below, from the preformed substrate of reality" (p. 935).

Rychlak identified the four major assumptive influences or theoretical grounds as the "Physikos, Bios, Socius, and Logos." These grounds roughly correspond to the grounds of physical science that explains inanimate events such as gravity; the biological sciences that base explanation on the physical substance of animate organisms; the social sciences that explain in terms of group relations and culture; and cognitive sciences which explain conceptual processes of intelligence and meaning making. Physikos and bios seem to constitute the grounding for the modern science of psychology and socius and logos seem to be the groundings for a postmodern science of psychology.

Rychlak asserted that what underlies the current epistemic war between positivists and perspectivists is the propensity for traditional scientists to rank order these theoretical grounds in a knowledge hierarchy from physical, biological, social, to cognitive. Or, even more simply, the tradition of ranking "knowing that" above "knowing how." Rychlak wisely urged that the grounds not be ranked; instead, they are to be appreciated as complementary explanations.

Borgen (1991, p. 93) wisely counseled that vocational psychology's "research enterprise will prosper if we don't vitiate our energies by joining the debate, but rather openly and nondefensively seek the values of alternate spectacles in research approaches." We need to foster a systematic pluralism (Shotter, 1992) and an epistemological eclecticism (Borgen, 1986) that appreciates and uses a number of interpretive standpoints for vocational psychology theory and research. To construct a sophisticated framework that can map the full complexity of vocational behavior enacted by diverse groups in manifold settings requires the lenses provided by both positivism and perspectivism. The lens of positivism focuses most clearly on macrotheory whereas the lenses of perspectivism focus sharply on microtheory. Perspectivism's concentration on particularity, multiplicity, context, difference, and usefulness has the potential to complement positivism by providing a microtheory approach that attends to the lacunas in career macrotheory. Modern macrotheory and postmodern microtheory could be combined to enrich and deepen vocational psychology's understanding of work life.

#### Construct career counseling theories

Practitioners face the enormous challenge of bridging the gap between objective knowledge and subjective understanding to make possible the counseling of clients in a systematic manner that is more than an art and less than a science. It is a substantial challenge to create a systematic and theoretically adequate account of the relation of theory to practice, one capable of countering the hegemony of logical positivism and meeting the challenges of perspectivism. This effort I envision as theory of career counseling. While we have theories of career development, and some would argue that they do double duty as theories of counseling (Swanson, 1994), I believe that we do not have theories of career counseling, with the single exception of Krumboltz's (1994) pioneering effort to construct a Learning Theory of Career Counseling.

Career counseling theories have the potential to take the fundamental assumptions about and principles of idealized action offered by positivism and combine this first-order technical knowledge with practice knowledge useful for second-order purposive choice making. Accordingly, career counseling theory should combine the contributions of positivist and perspectivist science. In looking for traits and what the client "is" (positivism), counselors assume that the life produces the autobiography. In listening to stories and what the client "does" (perspectivism), counselors assume that the autobiographical project itself produces the life. A career counseling theory could use the

perspectivist's narrative paradigm to elaborate the positivist's classic matching model in at least four ways: (a) to expand the core construct of fit to include belongingness, (b) to focus on uniqueness as well as similarity to other people, (c) to explain how people use the traits and abilities that they possess, and (d) to further explicate the career decision-making process by contextualizing it.

The purpose of combining the objective and subjective perspectives into a career counseling theory is to help clients find socially viable (objective) and personally suitable (subjective) vocational opportunities to develop their life themes through work. Viewing clients from both the objective and subjective perspectives allows practitioners to consider aptitudes and interests in a matrix of life experience (Berg, 1954). Practitioners who see clients from both perspectives have a better picture of clients' vocational behavior and career decision making. With this picture, counselors can do more than objectively describe how a client compares to the group and translate the client's interests and abilities into fitting occupations. Counselors can also subjectively explain clients' interests and abilities, not as possessions, but as solutions to problems of growing up (Carter, 1940). By combining trait descriptions and life theme explanations of interests, counselors may more effectively clarify clients' choices and enhance their ability to decide.

#### Emphasize case studies as a source of knowledge

In constructing career counseling theories, it might be useful to proceed one case at a time. American pragmatists advised theorists to begin with practice not abstractions. With the clinical case as the starting point, practitioners and theorists could collaborate in generating basic principles, in increasing depth. In this manner, the quest for theory starts with practitioners and their clients, not with theorists and the academy.

Kirschner, Hoffman, and Hill (1994) have argued for the case method of theory construction in writing that "because individuals change in such different ways, an important method to begin the study of the mechanisms of change in individual career counseling is a case study approach." Furthermore, they caution that in producing studies that inform career counseling theory aggregating data from groups of clients will obscure how an individual changes. This information is critical to constructing theories of career counseling.

#### Integrate career counseling with brief psychotherapy

A fourth path which practitioners and theorists can traverse in blending positivism with perspectivism is to continue to encourage the



integration of career counseling with brief psychotherapy. This integration, which is currently more written about than performed, allows the career practitioner to incorporate advances from psychotherapy process. In addition, it contextualizes the work role within the panoply of life roles enacted by each client. In promoting the integration of career counseling with psychotherapy, we can suggest that clients receive brief psychotherapy, including relevant career interventions, that increases their sense of agency. This would deemphasize work as central life role and emphasize life design that concentrates on self-definition and self-determination, not adjustment to the occupational structure. Such emphasis might address the concerns stated so elegantly by Fitzgerald and Betz (1994).

#### Conclusions

The modern tradition of natural science, built upon a mind-body dualism, has produced a schism between career theorists and practitioners. Each group has proceeded to fashion their own version of science and thus produced knowledge valued in each culture. To advance the career field beyond its current accomplishments requires a repair of the schism between objective and subjective perspectives on knowledge production.

The theory-practice schism may be characterized by tensions between epistemic dichotomies such as individualism versus collectivism, objectivity versus perspectivity, universality versus particularity, validation versus legitimation, essence versus context, and concepts versus constructs.

To successfully deal with such complex issues, career practitioners and theorists must quickly move beyond epistemic wars to construct career counseling theories based on clinical cases and integrated with models for brief psychotherapy.



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