

A Framework for Unifying Career Theory

Mark L. Savickas

Behavioral Sciences Department

Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine

Rootstown, OH 44272-0095

USA

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McAdams (1995) advanced the idea that "personality descriptors encompass at least three independent levels: (a) dispositional traits, such as the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1990); (b) contextualized concerns, such as developmental tasks and personal strivings (Cantor & Zirkel, 1990); and (c) integrative narratives of the self." McAdams asserts that a full description of personality requires all three levels: dispositional traits, personal concerns, and life stories.

Each level of personality description has a particular range of convenience, with its own models, methods, and materials. Theory and research pertinent to each of these three levels "requires its own indigenous nomenclatures, taxonomies, theories, frameworks, and laws" (McAdams, 1995, p. 365). McAdams (1995) conceptualized the levels of personality theories to link the theories, rather than continue epistemic wars about which theory is best and force scholars to join distinct discourse communities.

I believe that career counselors interested in the unification of career theories and the eventual construction of a comprehensive theory can benefit from transporting McAdams' (1995) analysis of personality theories to the realm of vocational psychology. A full description of vocational behavior and career development, similar to a full description of personality, may also require at least three distinct levels of analysis.

Level I: Vocational Personality Types

The career theory that parallels McAdams' level I dispositions, with an emphasis on the Big Five, appears to be Holland's (1997) typology of vocational personalities. Holland's conceptual framework provides a broad band tool for organizing phenomenon into type categories. Types represent abstract syndromes that emerge from concrete trait patterns. In fact, types are at a rather high level of abstraction despite being composed of a broad variety of concrete experiences. Types can be thought of as blueprints, tools, guidelines, or preferences for adaptation to life tasks. Dispositional types have an organizing influence that affects how individuals construe reality and their core roles. Thus, dispositions represent a self-organization of core structure that influences construing and interpreting the world. Holland's (1997) RIASEC model of personality types offers a practical structure for identifying the personological and vocational results of an individual's efforts at self-organization.

Level II: Career Concerns

Level I descriptors of personality and career concentrate on self-organization and may be viewed as psychological variables. In contrast, Level II descriptors emphasize self-extension into the social environment and may be viewed as psychosocial variables. The psychosocial descriptors are at level II because intrapersonal self-organization precedes interpersonal self-extension. Level II psychosocial variables describe how individuals reach out to integrate with society and regulate their own behavior relative to normative expectations.

McAdams denotes Level II variables as personal concerns. In contrast to Level I dispositions, level II personal concerns are contingent on contextual factors such as time, place, and role. These noncomparative and highly conditional personal concerns "speak to what people want, often during particular periods in their lives or within particular domains of action, and what life methods people use (strategies, plans, defenses, and so on) in order to get what they want or avoid getting what they don't want over time, in particular places, and/or with respect to particular roles" (McAdams, 1995, p. 376). McAdams operationally defines personal concerns borrowing a sentence from Cantor, Acker, and Cook-Flanagan (1992, p. 644): "those tasks that individual see as personally important and time consuming at particular times in their lives."

In the vocational realm, personal concern variables have been termed career concerns. These level II descriptors of vocational behavior and career development concentrate on issues of social integration and self-regulation. Career concerns involve the situated use of strategies for effective performance of a specific role in a particular place at a certain time. An individual's career concerns include contextualized strategies, motivational systems, and domain-specific skills for dealing with age-appropriate developmental tasks and social expectations and for pursuing personal projects.

Career concerns have typically been studied by adherents to the developmental perspective on vocational behavior. They have attempted to chart the natural course of career concerns from grade school through retirement. In so doing, they have divided careers into ontogenetic stages and thematic issues denoted by periods of concern about vocational growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline (Super, 1957). Each of these five periods has been characterized by prototypical developmental tasks; pertinent attitudes, beliefs, and competencies; and relevant coping

behaviors. For example, the construct of career maturity discussed in the first half of this chapter has been used to describe the exploration stage during which adolescents make educational and vocational choices. Researchers have characterized this process with developmental tasks of crystallizing and specifying; attitudes toward planning and exploring; beliefs about the work world and succeeding in it; competencies for decision making and problem solving; and coping behaviors.

The descriptors used in the life-span, life-space approach to locating career concerns in time and place all focus on self-regulation strategies and goal implementation during a particular ontogenetic period and in a specific social ecology. Thus, career concerns display themes and patterns of social meaning making arising from joint social activity that occurs in a certain cultural context, during a specific life stage, and in a distinct historical era. In short, Level II career concerns are highly contingent on the psychosocial context. In contrast, Level I vocational personality types seem to possess near-universal applicability, generalizing across numerous contexts. This difference may explain why Holland's (1997) RIASEC model and measures such as the Vocational Personality Inventory and the Self-Directed Search have been shown to be more easily transportable to other cultures than models of career concern and measures such as the Career Maturity Inventory and the Career Development Inventory.

Level III: Career Narratives

Level III personality theories involve self-defining, life stories that are substantive, retrospective narratives about the self and others. These internalized narratives of the self usually include reflective descriptions about how the individual adapted to tasks and traumas. These narratives do more than explain where individuals have been and who they hope to become. By constructing a plot, the narratives address the question of "Who am I?" The plot explains how they are agentic and to whom they feel connected. These stories of competence and connection impose a narrative structure on lived experience, one that explains the purpose and meaning for a life. The goal is to dramatically portray a dynamic life story and to narrate a theme or secret that makes a whole of an individual's life. For McAdams (1995), it is essential that this life story bring overall unity, purpose, and meaning to a life. Although, narratives explain discrete episodes, as whole they consciously organize and bound together a life. They give a life meaningful continuity over time. In short, the narratives

about life path compose a life, that is, they "provide a purposeful self-history that explains how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the anticipated self of tomorrow" (p. 382).

Through construction of meaning, life-enhancing narratives foster self-understanding and enrich Level I self-organization and Level II self-extension. McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, and Mansfield (1997) assert that Level III narratives begin to emerge during late adolescence and early adulthood as individuals create a self out of the fabric of their complex and contradictory experiences. They seek "to construct a more-or-less integrative narrative of the self to provide their life with a semblance of unity and purpose" (p. 678). In addition to being unique to adulthood, McAdams and his colleagues hypothesize that life narrative descriptors of personality are germane to modern and postmodern democratic societies that emphasize individuation of the self. "From this standpoint, life stories are jointly constructed by the person whose story it is and the culture within which that story has its constitutive meanings" (McAdams et al., 1997, p. 690). North American cultures foster individualism and, thus, promote stories of uniqueness and identity. Therefore, Level III life narratives are more unique than level I vocational dispositions or Level II career concerns because these unique stories fully contextualize the self in time, place, and role.

Narrative construction of meaning interprets lived experience by concentrating on a story line that reveals unity and purpose in the self. Obviously, these interpretations include constructs and events that lie outside personality theories of Level I and II. In constructing life narratives, individuals are free to interpret the facts of their life experiences. The narrative explains how individuals interpret the life they have lived and the self they have constructed. Because narratives depend on interpretation of a unique life course, narratives are never as self-evident as dispositional types or the outcomes of developmental and motivational strivings. This is why full knowledge of RIASEC types tells nothing about identity and may be a reason why Holland developed the Vocational Identity Scale to augment his theory of vocational personality types.

In the vocational domain, the counterpart of life narrative descriptions of personality seems to be career; more precisely, subjective career. Level I and II personality theories typically rely on objective conceptions of the individual formed by observers or resulting from personality inventories. In contrast, the subjective life narratives of Level III consist of individuals' conceptions of their personalities from their

own point of view as well as the meaning which they give to their lives. These narratives are not composed in terms of psychological traits or psychosocial concerns instead, they articulate needs and goals, purpose and intentional action, as well as the resultant life patterns-- the very stuff of career. Career is how we interpret our work and understand our productive and generative strivings. It embodies dispositional continuity and psychosocial change.

Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Career

Based on my analysis of career maturity and adaptation of McAdams' (1995) tripartite model of personality, I propose a four-level model for comprehending career theories and integrating them into a comprehensive model of careers. A first proposition states that the emergence of a RIASEC structure of personality is a precondition for adaptation. It represents the central structure of personality. The RIASEC model involves self-organization and it explains continuity and coherence in development. Stable RIASEC traits frame how adaptation takes place and influence potential for developmental changes. The adaptive orientation represented by a RIASEC type gives an individual a sense of continuity and coherence, as well as provides coping processes to master developmental changes and to adapt flexibly to changing circumstances.

A second proposition suggests that a secondary system of self-regulatory mechanisms emerges in conjunction with personality self-organization. These mechanisms, which remain generally the same throughout the life-span, mediate successful transactional adaptation. Currently, these mechanisms include concern, control, conviction, competence, and commitment (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). Their definitions integrate research findings from the career maturity literature with Erikson's (1950) constructs of psychosocial development. For example, career concern across the life span involves Erikson's trust versus mistrust theme, Super's future time perspective and planful attitudes, Crites' attitudes of orientation and involvement, Tiedeman and O'Hara's anticipation, and other closely related general purpose mechanisms such as optimism and hope.

Career narratives are the focus of the third proposition. Individuals who self-consciously reflect on their objective career can construct a subjective career in the form of a narrative. A career narrative comprehends the vocational self and shapes the further elaboration of this self-conception in the work world. Narratives about subjective career foster

self-knowledge and clarify personal goals. A sense of subjective career heightens self-understanding and self-definition. More importantly, subjective career guides adaptation as it negotiates opportunities and constraints, and uses the self-organized personality dispositions to address self-regulatory concerns.

A fourth proposition seeks to specify the actual processes of continuity and change in career adaptation by adopting Baltes and Baltes' (1990) model of selective optimization with compensation. The process of career development involves selection, optimization, and compensation. These three process can be used at the microbehavioral level to specify the actual processes and mechanisms of development for vocational personality types, career concerns, and career narratives.

Taken together, the self-organization of personality dispositions, self-regulatory concerns, self-definitional narratives, and selective optimization processes should be sufficient to portray the landscape of life-span career development.

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