

Paradigms and Practices for Career Intervention in the 21st Century

Mark L. Savickas

Northeastern Ohio Medical University

Rootstown, OH 44272

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The counseling profession's most productive response in helping those who live in an insecure world has been crafting a third paradigm for practice. Kuhn (1996) described a paradigm as a set of practices that define a scientific discipline at any particular period of time. A paradigm is a conceptual model that is widely-accepted in a practice community, and usually is the prevailing view of best practices. Each paradigm was crafted to address a new problem experience by the citizens in our society. We will use Stephen Pepper's (1942/1970) philosophical model of world hypotheses to articulate the epistemological positions that underlie three different theoretical, methodological, and therapeutic orientations. The three paradigms we will discuss today are modernity's vocational guidance, high modernity's career development, and post-modernity's life designing.

Vocational Guidance as a Formist Paradigm

The vocational guidance paradigm is about resemblance. Counselors may guide the lost by recognizing who they resemble and then guide them to explore occupations that employ that vocational personality type. We looked at an actor or persona (mask) and type cast her based on the traits that she exhibits. Her vocational personality type is indicated by a vector of resemblance to RIASEC types. In terms of epistemic positions, Pepper called the paradigm for vocational guidance "formism." According to Pepper, the root metaphor of formism is similarity or type, meaning that the objects in the world can be categorized and classified. Of course Holland's RIASEC types are the pinnacle of this paradigm. Formism attempts to answer the question "What is it like?" Its root metaphor is similarity or type (e.g., attachment styles, parenting styles), and its value lies in its simplicity.

Career Education as an Organismic Paradigm

The second paradigm is called career counseling, but dare we say that it is mislabeled--a point we will return to shortly. This second paradigm looks at a client from the inside out in addition to from the outside in. Of course these are complementary perspectives. Holland took an objective or outside view of individuals as actors on occupational stages whereas Super took a subjective or inside view of individuals as agents who manage their own lives. Career development education attends to the attitudes, beliefs and competencies (the ABCs of career development) that agents may use to manage developmental tasks and shape their careers. This means orienting people to future developmental tasks and helping them increase their coping readiness and resources.

According to Pepper, this second paradigm is called Organismic because it attempts to answer the question “How does it develop?” Pepper’s metaphor for this world view is agency, in that individuals are seen as the source of their acts. In this paradigm the individual is the source of his or her own development. Development rises from within, and as Super often said “careers unfold” as individuals discover who they are and “manifest a self.”

So, the first paradigm-formism- is vocational guidance about who the client or actor resembles. The second paradigm-organicism- is career education about the process of developing agency to shape one’s career. Super called it career counseling, but it has never been about counseling. It is career development education-career education for short—and with best practitioners working with adults it may be called career coaching or even mentoring.

Career Counseling as a Contextualist Paradigm

So the first paradigm for career services is vocational guidance with the actor while the second is career development education with the agent. The third paradigm is career counseling. Because career development education has been called “career counseling” for decades, the third paradigm is still in need of a name or brand, we have called it career construction counseling or life designing because the term “career counseling” has been taken. But what it is a turn from logical positivism of objective vocational guidance and subjective career education to social constructionism of projects. Career is now viewed as a project -- not the properties of an object or the self-consciousness of subject-- but a space between the individual and society. Career, from this perspective, is a story that people tell about their work life and this space. They author a story about themselves as actor and agents in their lives. The intervention of counseling seeks to concentrate reflection on identity themes and then extend them into the future, not just recognize resemblance or promote readiness. It is using reflexivity and themes to design a live. It is about uniqueness and attends to emotion, not just resemblance and reasoning.

Pepper calls this third paradigm contextualism. The contextual world view defines reality as an ongoing and dynamic event. The individual is seen as constantly changing-especially through interaction, and action is conceptualized as behavior infused with meaning. The contextualist makes distinctions, he or she does not make classifications. Formism such as Holland’s RIASEC general types attempts to remove the context, whereas contextualism insists on the particulars of context. Contextualism attempts to answer the question “How does it happen?” or perhaps more appropriately, “How it is happening?” Its root metaphor is an historic event in the sense of an event unfolding in time. So the third paradigm is about uniqueness, not resemblance. It is about individuality not individual differences. It is about clinical counseling and case study research. It focuses on emotion and reflexivity as much as on similarity and reasoning.