Cognitive Complexity: Postmodern Career Counseling in Practice

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Abstract

Career counseling theory is entering into a postmodern era (Hoekstra, 2010). The postmodern view of career counseling is largely based on constructionist theory (LaPointe, 2010; Sveningsson & Alvession, 2003), viewing career identity as co-constructed from individuals interacting within environments at the micro and macro level (Savickas, 2003; Savickas, 2007). These authors encourage for career counselors to work with clients on differentiating unique social interactions with a re-integration of self into the four levels of ecological systems. This process assists clients in a career identification process, which may prove to be a useful component of postmodern career counseling.

*Keywords*: *Career identity, constructionist theory, cognitive complexity*

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Historically, career identity has been seen as an individual construction often neglecting social construction (LaPointe, 2010; Sveningsson & Alvession, 2003). Currently, Careers have become less static, with boundaries for careers less defined. Individuals seek to develop portable career identities which enable them to become entrepreneurs of their own career identity (Hoekstra, 2010). Understanding what a career identity is and how to establish it, is an ongoing developmental process (Savickas, 2003). Individual career identity is recognized as a developmental process which is in part shaped by large socio-economic trends and small human interactions (LaPointe, 2010; Richardson, 2012). Career counselors working with clients should be cognizant of their clients’ career identity within the contexts of individual development, socio-economic trends, and their personal interactions.

Due to the new career identity development paradigm, Savickas (2003) called for a social transformation of careers and for career counselors to analyze the impact of social influences on career models, theories, and practices. This social transformation requires career counselors to be aware of the many different aspects of career identity and the manner which social complexities impact their clients’ career identity formation. This article seeks to examine the processes and strategies career counselors may choose to conceptualize their clients’ career identity.

**Career Identity**

Identity as a psychological concept was an established and ongoing theme among psychodynamic psychologists beginning with Freud (Meijers, 1998). Career identity represents a core component of general identity (Skorikov & Vonderacek, 1997). Erickson (1968) notes the importance of career identity as a core, integrative element of identity; meaning career identity development not only influences career choice and fulfillment, but also serves a contributing factor of an individual’s meaning making schemas. Due to its importance career identity serves as a foundational component of almost every career theory (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). While career identity serves a foundational role in career theory it assumes a different role depending on the theory. Understanding the role of career identity within different career theories enables career counselors to gather a more complete picture of career identity.

**Theories of Career Identity**

While identity development first began with Freud and other psychodynamic theorists, Erickson’s ego identity development theory integrated psychology with a systematic expansion of identity development (Meijers, 1998). Erickson believed that humans develop in stages and that development occurs in a predetermined and linear process (Lancaster, 2006). Many of the career identity theories in use today are based on Erickson’s identity model.

For example, Holland’s vocational identity is based on Erickson’s identity development model; Holland’s *Vocational Identity Scale* (VIS) gives a clear picture of his view of vocational identity (Holland, Johnston, & Asama, 1993). The VIS measures vocational identity as, “the possession of a clear and stable picture of one’s goals, interests, and talents” (Holland et al., 1993, p.1). However, Meijers (1998) argues that Holland’s vocational identity is not the same as career identity as Holland’s identity model is too sterile and does not explain how people develop.

Holland’s view of vocational identity—when viewed as a part of his career theory, answers some of these concerns. Holland’s et al. (1968) theory takes into account individual personality traits and awareness of career preferences. If personality traits are fulfilled by career preferences, then the career is a good fit. Holland saw the development of vocational identity occurring in childhood and adolescence, but his theory largely ignores career development of adult populations (Tokar & Swanson, 1995).

Holland’s definition of vocational identity was so influential Super adopted it in his career development theory (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Super’s (1980) career identity differed from Holland’s in that it included the life-span in the development process of career identity. Super’s career identity theory thus includes adult development—an area lacking in Holland’s work. A critique of both Holland’s and Super theories is that they are rooted in the idea of a linear career trajectory, ignoring the more fluid career development one might find today in society. Additionally, both theories ignore the importance of social influences in career development (Blustein, Murphy, Coutinho, Catraio, & Backus, 2011), an area recognized by Gottfredson work (1981).

Gottfredson’s theory of career identity addresses some of the concerns found in Holland’s and Super’s theories. Gottfredson viewed career identity development as a balance between the concepts of circumscription and compromise (Gottfredson, 1981). Gottfredson (1981) saw people moving through stages of circumscription—a process where an individual rules out career options she deems unacceptable. Once circumscription is complete, a person will then compromise on a career choice.

This compromise is arguably necessary based on the near impossibility of a client finding a career which meets every career expectation (Gottfredson, 1981). Much like Holland and Super, Gottfredson’s theory is a stage model. Unlike Holland and Super whose theories saw humans moving toward development without an explanation of what drives that development, Gottfredson’s choice became a major factor in career identity development. Career counseling professionals were then able to integrate circumscription and compromise concepts into practice. However, Gottfredson’s theory is not without flaw. Pryor (1985) critiqued Gottfredson’s career identity theory, stating the theory placed too much focus on the self—ignoring the environment wherein the self operates. Pryor’s critique of Gottfredson’s theory is being addressed with recent literature on social influences of career identity.

**Social influences on Career and Career Identity**

Post-modern theories of career identity development take a greater ecological systemic perspective with the social dynamics currently shaping career identity development. LaPointe (2010) argues for a constructionist view of career identity, where career identity is no longer a construct a person possesses, but a dynamic interaction which is co-constructed, socially located, and executed via these social interactions. Richardson (2012) notes the importance of including both macro social interactions and interpersonal micro interactions in assisting the development of career identity. Savickas (2003) notes this shift in career identity development requires career counselors to be less concerned with career identity attainment and more aligned with the developmental process of career identity. Savickas (2007) points out three different procedural dynamics, which career counselors should attend to, in an effort to better understand this process. These dynamics include: understanding the self from self as object, to self as subject, to self as project.

This new approach in understanding career identity development places an emphasis on understanding the self as a social product which is highlighted in Savickas’ categories. It breaks away from the traditional individualist view of human development, and views people through a lens of continual interactions between themselves and their environment. Eisenberg (1995) highlights these interactions by arguing that the “human brain is constructed socially” (p.1). Richardson (2012) states the first step in social construction is language, and from language construction develops into larger spheres: relationships, institutions/communities, and the physical world. Each of these categories is involved in the co-construction of an individual’s career identity. As such, career counselors need to be aware of these factors while working with their clients.

Asking clients about important relationships, exploring client involvement in the community or institutions, and preferred methods of interacting in the physical world may invite greater understanding of the holistic nature of the client. Recognizing patterns of social interactions may provide insight within the counseling relationship. The difficultly for career counselors involves practicing and refining the ability to maintain in their frame of reference each level of social construction for the client at one time. This ability to more fully examine and increase awareness of an individual’s social construction will assist a counselor in better understanding the dynamic interplay between the different categories. Understanding levels of social construction involves the concept of cognitive complexity.

**Cognitive Complexity**

Cognitive complexity in social behavior refers to how a person interprets events and

behaviors of others (Blaas & Heck, 1978). Within counseling, cognitive complexity refers to two specific meaning making domains (Welfare & Borders, 2010). The first involves differentiation, or, the ability to process behaviors of others in multiple and complex ways (Welfare & Borders, 2010). The second aspect of cognitive complexity is the ability to integrate and make use of those differentiated behaviors (Granello, 2010). Within the counseling profession, cognitive complexity is seen as the ability of a counselor to take multiple and increasingly complex views of a client and integrate these multiple views into a whole (i.e. case conceptualizations [Welfare & Borders, 2010]).

Cognitive complexity in career counseling includes the ability of a career counselor to understand social dynamics as they relate to career identity and development. Helping clients view the impact of social dynamics in the co-construction of their career identity can allow the client to gain a more complete understanding of their career identity. Educating clients on the importance of recognizing social dynamics which are present in their world may assist in creating opportunities for insight. Currently unexamined is the ability of counselors to differentiate social events at varying levels.

Past studies of cognitive complexity in counselors have looked at the general ability of counselors to utilize differentiation (Duys & Hedstrom, 2000; Granello, 2010). As Richardson (2012) notes, there is an increasing importance for counselors to be able to differentiate at micro-levels (i.e. language, self-talk, social interaction) and macro-levels (i.e. institutions/communities, and the physical world). These authors believe the ability of career counselors to differentiate at the micro and macro-level will have a direct benefit to career counseling.

**Implications for Counseling Practice**

Differentiation in the counseling setting involves understanding the depth and differences in individual client thinking patterns. Surface level differentiation involves differences in personal characteristics such as age, socioeconomic status, gender, race, and ethnicity (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). Piecing a client’s story based on individual characteristics or experiences may result in fragmentation, an activity which reduces our capability to wholly understand a larger situation or worldview (Lafitte, 1996; Morin, 2004). Higher levels of complex differentiation involve the ability for a counselor to take on multiple perspectives, heuristics, and to interpret a client’s story more accurately (Page, 2008). Integration is the concept most often coupled with differentiation when discussing cognitive complexity. Lopez and Gallifa (2008) explain differentiation as a process where a counselor’s integrates the multiple perspectives of a client into a cohesive analysis. Low integration and low differentiation is the most simplistic view of a client. High levels of integration combined with low levels of differentiation create a fragmented view of a client. Low integration but high differentiation creates a monolithic view, with high levels of both differentiation and integration as the most complex view of a client (Lopez & Gallifa, 2008). Examining a client from multiple levels creates this higher level of complexity.

Brofenbrenner’s Ecological System includes an individual at the center of four complex systems: macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem (Brofenbrenner, 1979). Placing the individual at the center indicates the complex interaction and layered contexts of an individual. Exploring a client’s microsystem, for example, may be general practice for many career counselors. Counselors may begin by asking questions to gain greater understanding about the individual’s family, peers, church, and school. A career counselor may even provide a blank ecological systems diagram­­–– where client and counselor would map out the influence of the different ecological systems in the client’s life. Depending on the level of client comfort, the dynamic interactions occurring within each setting may also be discussed. These dynamic interactions can be reviewed by the counselor and client to examine values, beliefs, and patterns.

As the counseling relationship grows, additional layers of interactions may be revealed. Recalling these interactions, along with the important family members and friends in a client’s life creates a database of knowledge. This database will allow a counselor to gain insight regarding the attitude of the individual towards the ideologies of the culture, as well as patterns of attitudes and beliefs of the individual (Brofenbrenner, 1979). The ability of a counselor to share in this larger understanding (Arrow & Henry, 2010) of a client’s career interests combined with the recognition of the social interactive dynamics creates a myriad of ecological levels which may provide a more holistic method of increasing and/or solidifying career identity.

**Conclusion**

Career identity development and formation is a central aspect to career counseling (Richardson, 2012). Past theories of career identity placed a large emphasis on the self and ignored the social environment where the self operates (Savickas, 2007). Career counselors need to be able to identify not only the self- factors of their clients but also the social factors which helped to shape the development of the self. The use of cognitive complexity as a measure of those factors may provide a clue in understanding the ability of counselors to balance the many social aspects under which a person develops. Increasing differentiation and integration in practice may assist counselor development of cognitive complexity. Creating interventions and strategies aimed at understanding both micro and macro levels of individuals will assist counselors in a more holistic representation of a client in their journey towards creating a career identity.

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