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Understanding Career Development: a convergence of perspectives

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ABSTRACT To conceptualise the nature of individuals' life career development, this literature review focuses on identifying three broadly defined explanations: career as life process, career as individual agency and career as meaning making. By integrating both the established and emerging theories into the analysis, a convergence of perspectives are presented to reflect some of the essential psychosocial characteristics of people's worklife and vocational enhancement. While objective career is recognised as a major component in people's life career pathway, the significant function of subjective career in the process is revisited and highlighted.

As our Western society enters into the post-modern and post-industrial era, the meaning of career development has become broader and more complex (Peavy, 1993). Parallel to the unprecedented structural changes in human worklife such as the coming of information age, high technology and globalisation, people are experiencing a profound epistemological expansion and enrichment of defining and redefining the meaning of career development in their fast-changing vocational life. To understand what career development really connotes, thus, becomes a meaningful exploration. It calls for comprehensive and integral explanations that will reflect a holistic process of human growth, i.e. a portrait of how individuals make sense, construct and enhance their vocational life in the current world of work.

With this goal in mind, this analytical discussion is intended to offer a meta-analysis of some of the literature on the topic of career development. By revisiting these theoretical models and research evidence generated in the past few decades, this discussion will identify three broadly defined explanations of career development: career as life process, career as individual agency, and career as meaning making. It is hoped that such a literature review, which incorporates both the established and emerging theories of career development (Brown & Brooks, 1996; Zunker, 1998), will

present a convergence of integrated perspectives that are heuristic to vocational psychology in general, and inform people to better cope with worklife dynamics in particular. In doing so, it may contribute to help individuals develop a sense of vocation that will serve to enhance their worklife quality and vocational well-being (Cochran, 1990).

Career Defined

In discussing the topic of career development, it is necessary to define the meaning of 'career' in the scope of the present discussion. Theorists and researchers have provided a series of definitions focusing on the main characteristics of the term. According to the National Career Development Association (Sears, 1982), career is the totality of work and leisure in which a person is involved in his or her whole life. Gysbers & More (1981) have suggested that the term 'career' encompasses various roles, circumstances and places that one encounters in a lifetime. To reflect the nature of such a comprehensive and complex self-development through the person's life span, it is advisable that the term 'career' be replaced by the phrase 'life career development'.

McDaniels (1978) argued that while a job or occupation is a part of one's career, it does not represent the whole spectrum of this broad concept. Career means a lifestyle consisting of a sequence of work or leisure activities throughout one's lifetime. Raynor & Entin (1982) pointed out that the term career is a combination of phenomenological and behavioral conceptions. It reflects one's self-perception within one's social context in regard to one's past and present experiences as well as future plans.

When the sense of career is expanded to multi-faceted phenomena of role integration in one's life experiences, factors such as work, education, family and the life, come into active play in the person's career choice and career building process (Hansen & Keierleber, 1978). According to Super (1976), career can be recognised as:

the course of events which constitutes a life; the sequence of occupations and other life roles which combine to express one's commitment to work in his or her total pattern of self-development; the series of remunerated and non-remunerated positions occupied by a person from adolescence through retirement, of which occupation is only one; includes work-related roles such as those of student, employee, and pensioner together with complementary avocational, familial, and civic roles. Careers exist only as people pursue them; they are person-centered. It is this last notion of careers, "they exist only as people pursue them," which summarizes much of the rationale for career guidance. (p. 4)

In reviewing the diverse explanations on the term career, Herr & Cramer (1992) have postulated that careers are (a) unique to each individual, (b) created by the person's choice and decision, (c) dynamic and unfold throughout one's life journey, (d) integrated entities of prevocational and postvocational considerations, and (e) interrelated with one's other life roles in family, community and leisure.

Although the definitions provided above seem to differ slightly with respect to their emphasis and wording regarding the concept of career, they appear to echo similar key characteristics and variables. That is, instead of viewing career as a narrowly defined, isolated work-related aspect only in one's life, career is seen as an integral, active and essential component in a person's life. While one's career experiences always intertwine with other experiences in life, the person's life experiences can well reflect a general picture of his or her career development. From this sense, life means career, and vice versa. This seems to coincide with Miller-Tiedeman's (1988) conception of the relationship between life and career, though her definition of 'life-is-career' is heavily influenced by phenomenological and existential philosophical stances (Sharf, 1997). "A career is a person's life, and in this usage, there is one career for every person" (Cochran, 1991, p. 7).

Following a similar path of understanding, the present discussion takes a broad perspective in discerning the meaning of career, and respectively, in defining its conceptual scope. That is, rather than treating career as a single matter on its own, this analysis intends to look at one's life experiences and career experiences as a whole entity, or in other words, as a blended and co-related human way of being. From this vantage point, the terms 'career' and 'life career' are used interchangeably in the following analysis. They are both utilised to define and describe the events, experiences, thoughts, actions, etc., which have impact on one's worklife, as well as other aspects of personal and social life. These terms indicate the same process that the person goes through in his or her life passage.

Career as Life Process

The Developmental Nature

Career is about an ongoing process that accompanies the person's entire life. Perhaps the most influential theory supporting this perspective is Super's (1990) life-span, life-space approach to career. According to Super (1980), one's career is composed of a series of main career developmental stages, namely, growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement, throughout one's whole life. Within each of these stages, the person plays certain career roles and strives to accomplish varied

career developmental tasks which correspond to these roles requirements (Sharf, 1997).

Similar to Super's viewpoints, Ginzberg (1984) and his colleagues contended that career follows a developmental process. As a person enters into different phases of life, his or her views, and positions on career choice are defined and refined. Based on tentative evaluation, invalid choices are gradually eliminated, and more appropriate options are examined and narrowed down. Consequently, a decision on one's career choice is formed. Although Ginzberg and his colleagues' (Ginzberg et al, 1951) work focused only on early vocational development for adolescence, and the theory itself has been regarded as incomplete, its developmental view toward individual life career process appears to have not only historical, but up-to-date implications for understanding the evolving and dynamic nature of an individual's career.

It is particularly worth noticing that in revising some of his early assumptions, Ginzberg (1972) stated that career decision is not an irreversible process, but rather, can be modified as time proceeds and life circumstances change. Ginzberg (1984) claimed:

Occupational choice is a lifelong process of decision making for those who seek major satisfaction from their work. This leads them to reassess repeatedly how they can improve the fit between their changing career goals and the realities of the world of work. (p. 180)

Career in this sense has, among other prospects, three core characteristics showing that it (1) attends and goes across one's total lifeline, (2) represents a changing process rather than a static state, and (3) calls for the person to become the active agent who constantly builds constructive bridges between oneself and one's worklife environment. This is because "life structure once designed is not static; it runs a developmental course and then needs redesign" (Super et al, 1996, p. 130).

The Diverse Roles

One's life-span consists of a series of roles that one needs to play in domains such as family, school, community, and workplace (Super, 1990). Within the entire span of life, the person performs his or her roles such as child, student, leisurite, citizen, worker, spouse, homemaker, parent, and pensioner (Super, 1990). Super (1980) postulated that these life roles interact in a manner which is supportive, supplementary, compensatory, or neutral. Depending on different circumstances, role interactions can be either facilitating or conflicting to one another. This is why "multiple roles can enrich life or overburden it" (Super et al, 1996, p. 129).

Super et al (1996) criticised many career theories with respect to the importance of diverse social positions and associated roles enacted by the person in his or her life space. The ultimate and simple truth in explaining

a career is that the person lives a life while making a living. As Super et al (1996) argued:

The work role, albeit a critical role in contemporary society, is only one among many roles that an individual occupies. A person's multiple roles interact to reciprocally shape each other. Thus, individuals make decisions about work-role behavior, such as occupational choice and organizational commitment, within the circumstances imposed by the constellation of social positions that give meaning and focus to their lives. The same job holds different meanings for two individuals who live in different situations. (p. 128)

The constant overlapping of role enactment reflects a complex lifelong symphony. In this regard, career is a combination of rich activities and tasks carried out by the individual who is required to take on, and is capable of enforcing, a series of multiple missions in life (Cochran, 1990). These missions render meanings to the diverse roles and vice versa.

The Transitional Process

The fulfilment of roles manifests changes of life in different stages. For example, according to Super's (1990) chronicle sequence model of traditional life career developmental stages (i.e. the life-career rainbow), when the person makes the transition from growth and exploration stages to establishment and maintenance stages, his or her roles of child and student are transformed into that of worker and homemaker, with the roles of leisurite and citizen crossing over all the stages. Role-shift here brings substantial changes in the life-span.

Career transitions, thus, may happen as the person needs to move on to the next phase of his or her life. Parallel to Super's stage theory, other theorists have tried to pinpoint different reasons that may prompt the person to seek career changes in life. To meet personal needs can certainly be a trigger for a career choice as well as a career move (Roe, 1956; Roe & Lunneborg, 1990). The mutual satisfaction between the person and his or her working environment may be another potential cause for career transition (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Dawis, 1996). The transition may also be initiated by the individual as a conscious decision to change his or her courses of career action to fulfil self cognitive development (Tiedeman & O'Hara, 1963; Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1990). It has been noted that career transition is more likely to occur when individuals enter into their adult life of mid-career (i.e. middle phase of the worklife), for it is assumed that people should usually have established their career by then and are more capable of making changes (Zunker, 1994).

Career transition in the current world of work goes beyond the common sense of time and rationale which are embedded in, and explained by, the traditional life-stage theories. As Herr et al (1990) point

out, shifting economic boundaries in Western society yields drastic changes in the structure of, choice of and planning for one's worklife. The worklife today is featured by the fast disappearance of many traditional worker-roles, and the emergence of various new career opportunities based on social, economic, and technological changes (Rifkin, 1995). The end result is that career change has become a regular part of working life during all stages. For example, along with the computer revolution and high-tech automation, many traditional vocations such as assembly-line type of work become obsolete. In the meantime, the labour market's demands for workers who are skilful in computer and high-tech related areas may rapidly increase. In order to meet the changing demands, a manufacturing worker may have to consider entering retraining to become a computer systems operator.

It becomes understandable that the swift changing face of our postmodern era has induced a "rapid acceleration in the number of transitions encountered in all aspects of living" (Hopson, 1981, p. 36). Meanwhile, many aspects of adult life experiences themselves frequently involve transitions which may be anticipated or unanticipated, and voluntary or involuntary (Schlossberg, 1987; Hopson & Adams, 1977). From this view, the spectrum and meaning of transition are broadened to include not only influential incidents in certain stages of life (e.g. mid-career change), but also other relevant experiences accompanying the whole developmental process of one's life and career. As Schlossberg (1987) has contended, the transition itself standing alone does not convey much significance to the person; its importance and meaningfulness lie with its impact on other variables, such as roles and relationships, which can be critical to the person's growth in his or her life-span.

In an attempt to present a comprehensive model that takes into account a diversity of adult life experiences in transition, Schlossberg (1984) concludes that there are three major components of transition. First, the type, context, and impact of the transition need to be understood. The types of transitions can be defined as anticipated, unanticipated, chronic hassle and non-event. The context of the transition refers to the relationship between the person and the environment, and the circumstances in which the transition happens. The impact of the transition on the person involves the degree of disruption in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. The second component looks at transition as a process rather than an event. It is a process during which people make their appraisals of and react to the situation over time. This process is marked by the continuous appraisals and re-assessment by the individuals who are involved. The third and final component refers to an individual's coping resources as well as the balance of present and potential assets and liabilities. According to Schlossberg (1984) and Schlossberg et al (1995), factors such as one's racial and ethnic

background, affected by one's value orientation and cultural norms, could have potential influence in the coping resources.

While Schlossberg's (1984) model presents an integrated paradigm concerning adult life transition, other theorists look at the issue with a different emphasis. Hopson & Adams (1977), for example, postulate that individuals' coping with transition goes through a seven-phase process, namely, immobilisation (i.e. the person is overwhelmed, and unable to respond to the event), minimisation (i.e. to make the change appear smaller than it is), self-doubt, letting go (i.e. to let go of anxiety and stress associated emotions; detach oneself from the past and turn to focus on the future), testing out (i.e. develop new energy and a sense of confidence), search for meaning and internalisation (i.e. acquire insight and strength in coping, which may lead to change of values and lifestyle). Likewise, Amundson & Borgen (1982) have illustrated a similar model in describing the emotional and behavioral dynamics unemployed people go through in their transition from the initial job loss to the extended unemployment experience. Research shows that these dynamics moderate or intensify the psychological stressors in the transition process (Borgen & Amundson, 1987; Amundson & Borgen, 1987). It may be quite heuristic to extend such a conceptual framework and its associated research evidence into studying other experiences regarding transition and coping. For example, the experience of athletes who withdraw from their professional sports and make the transition to another career may echo many of the psychological stages and emotional shifts that unemployed people go through (Swain, 1991).

Originally developed as a theoretical frame for helping people cope with the transition during unemployment, Amundson's (1994) concept of 'identity negotiation' appears to hold some promise for understanding the transition process. Amundson (1994) suggests that many personal, interpersonal, familial, organisational, socio-economical and environmental variables come into play in the definition and redefinition of an individual's identity during the transition process. Although it is difficult to control many of these exchanges, some factors, such as seeking support from others, directing self-talk, marketing one's self, and being persistent, can be helpful. While identity negotiation offers a pertinent approach in coping with transition during unemployment, its general implications may be applicable to persons in other situations of life career transition. For example, while a university graduate joining the work force may encounter the challenge of an identity transformation, adult/mature students who return from the world of work to school for retraining or further advancement of their educational levels may often have to go through the same adjustment process: they may confront the challenging experience of re-gaining their student identity which they left behind many years ago.

Career as Individual Agency

If career is recognised as a life process, it is vital to identify and understand the human participation in this process. Life career phenomena do not exist without human involvement. People are their own actors in performing career developmental tasks, and they are the self-agents in shaping their lives (Cochran & Laub, 1994; Collin & Young, 1986). In life career pursuits, it is the agent who initiates action, otherwise, optimal changes can hardly take place (Amundson, 1995b).

According to Amundson (1995a), the level of people's self-awareness and sense of agency or self-efficacy, among other things, are the two key variables that moderate their life career decisions. These two components are essential since "persons with high levels of self-awareness and personal agency are in a better position to respond proactively to external circumstances and exert more control over long terms effects" (Amundson, 1995a, p. 11).

Self-awareness

It has long been noted in human psychology that the essence of an individual's life rests on the structure of 'the self' (Moustakas, 1956). In other words, the person's psychological selfhood forms the very core, monitoring his or her cognitive, emotive and behavioral aspects, their internal relationships within the person, and their interactions with the external world. In accordance with such a conceptualisation, psychologically-orientated career theorists concentrate their attention on the person's selfhood. It is assumed that the quality and the level of the psychological self may have a pivotal impact on life career development (see Super, 1957, 1963, 1981; Tiedeman & O'Hara, 1963; Holland, 1973, 1992; Gottfredson, 1981, 1985, 1996; Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1990). Super's (1957, 1963, 1981) pioneering work on self-concept has not only formed the core of his developmental theory of life career, but also significantly contributed to the enrichment and expansion of the function of the psychological self in the study of career for the last few decades. Super viewed career development as the process of developing and implementing one's self-concept. Self-concept depends upon a combination of factors such as biological characteristics, the social roles one plays, and evaluations of others' reactions to oneself. Self-concept refers to how the person views self and related situations. The self-concept develops throughout the life span. In contrast to trait-and-factor theory (see Williamson, 1972) which focuses on objective and external measures of self, Super saw the self-concept as a subjective psychological entity that interacts with the society-at-large (Sharf, 1997). Self-concept thus can be defined as a "picture of the self in some role,

situation, or position, performing some set of functions, or in some web of relationships” (Super, 1963, p. 18).

Furthermore, Super’s elaboration on the conception of ‘self-concept system’ presents a comprehensive and holistic explanation to his self-concept theory, as well as to the life career phenomena. To clarify the distinction between a self-concept and a self-concept system, Super et al (1996) have made the following comments:

The former denotes the qualities of a self-concept in a single role such as worker or parent and the latter denotes the qualities of sets or constellation of role self-concepts. This distinction recognizes that people have not just on self-concept but rather a constellation of self-concepts. The self-concept system is the picture the person has of self in numerous roles and situations. In other words, people have one self-concept system that is general and inclusive; within this system, they have more specific and limited concepts of self in various roles (self as mother, self as teacher, self as partner, and so on). (p. 141)

The vocational self-concept, therefore, is considered to be an important part in one’s total self-concept system. It is “the constellation of self attributes which the individual considers vocationally relevant; these may or may not have been translated into a vocational preference” (Super, 1963, p. 19).

Parallel to Super’s position, Gottfredson (1996) defines self-concept as one’s view of who one is; included in it are elements of the individual’s appearance, abilities, personality, gender, values and place in society. Among these components, some are more essential than others with regard to one’s sense of self. “People may not be able to articulate their self-concepts, nor may their self-perceptions always be accurate, but they can act on them and protect them. The self-concept is the object of cognition (the ‘me’), but it also reflects the person as actor (the ‘I’)” (Gottfredson, 1996, pp. 183-184). The cause-effect relationship between the actor and the object, from this view, is reciprocal rather than only one-way.

Both Super’s and Gottfredson’s premises can be partly supported by Holland’s view concerning the role of self-concept in making career choices. The tenet of Holland’s (1966, 1973) person-tape theory is based on the trait-and-factor philosophy of a rational match between people and their work environments. Although social influence on the formation of people’s personality type is not a focus of the theory, and therefore is not being illuminated, Holland points out that a career choice reflects one’s self-perception and self-expression of which type of person he or she is. As Holland (1992) has stated:

People search for environments that will let them exercise their skills and abilities, express their attitudes and values, and take on agreeable problems and roles. (p. 4)

Obviously, the person-environment interaction here goes beyond the traditional objective and external measures emphasised by the trait-and-factor approach. While matching is no doubt still a critical part of the interaction, individuals' awareness of many attributes of the self, such as those specified above by Holland (1992, p. 4), becomes essential in activating the interaction process. The psychological inner-self performs such a significant role that it can not be replaced by outside variables.

With respect to the inner-self, Tiedeman and Miller-Tiedeman (Tiedeman & O'Hara, 1963; Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1982, 1990) have articulated the importance of cognitive self-development and associated career decision making behaviour. Tiedeman and Miller-Tiedeman focus on the individual's uniqueness and complexity. Rather than studying decision-making process itself, individual processes in decision-making deserve more attention. This is because the person's inner-self or ego development (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1990) plays a central role in the total self-development in life career. "Moreover, in viewing life as a career, individuals should be guided to become more self-directed" (Zunker, 1994, p. 40). As such, the individual's total self-concept or self-concept system is in a continuous process of modification, refinement, and growth. People encounter and cope with emerging ego-crises within the self-concept system (Erikson, 1968, 1982) through their life-span. The person is considered to be capable of taking on such challenges for he or she "is essentially a scientist applying and observing the results of moving to one's own inner wisdom" (Miller-Tiedeman, 1988, p. 34).

According to Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman's (1990) life career theory, career choice and decision-making is primarily a self-organising process in search of life career direction from within. Since career choices are a "shift and focus to one's internal frame of reference" (Miller-Tiedeman & Tiedeman, 1990, p. 31), one's self-concept will function as the central generator and monitor in directing the person to act, to adjust, to change, and to grow. This key function may be illustrated by the metaphor of the control-tower in a modern airport. Without it, neither the airplanes from various routes can come in, nor the flights to different destinations are able to take off. The result is a halt of the air traffic and the airport is unable to function.

By the same token, the role and function of self-concept in one's life career is too vital to be overlooked. It appears indisputable that without looking at individuals' unique formation and associated elements of the inner-self, it is virtually impossible to make sense of who they are, where they come from, and where they are going in their life career pathway. The socially influenced total self-concept, therefore, operates as a core that

coordinates and manages the person's self-agency in designing his or her life career blueprints. Based on this notion, one invests energy into the career building process, and takes appropriate action to execute these plans.

Self-efficacy

Another important part of human agentic quality is the self-knowledge explored by Bandura (1977, 1982, 1986) in his self-efficacy conception, a central construct in social cognitive theory. Bandura (1986) has defined self-efficacy expectations as "people's judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance" (p. 391). According to Bandura (1977, 1986), self-efficacy expectations affect choice and initiation of behaviour, effort, persistence and, hence, level of performance or accomplishment.

While designing life career projects, people need to be clearly aware of their aptitude to carry out the tasks required by the world of work. One of the main conditions for an amiable and effective person-environment-correspondence in one's worklife is the fit between the worker's capacity and the demands of the work setting (Dawis, 1996). Although our current world of work has substantially changed since Frank Parsons first introduced his ideology of trait-and-factor matching in vocational guidance (see, Crites, 1981; Herr & Cramer, 1992; Zunker, 1994), the very principles of Parsons's insights maintain their vitality in our world today. That is, the relationship between the two basic components, the person and the working environment, still remains to be coordinated even though the perspectives and approaches to connect these two parts may vary (Amundson, 1995a; Amundson & Poehnell, 1996; Young et al, 1996; Lent et al, 1996; Holland, 1992).

Having taken environmental circumstances into consideration, self-efficacy expectations are neither mere ego expressions from the inner-self nor sole objective measurements from the external world. Rather, they are subjective self-judgements that are both cognitive in nature and socially constructed. They are cognitive for they require the person's rational thinking to assess his or her ability; they are socially constituted because they take into account of social contexts in which human ability is appraised (Lent et al, 1996).

Drawn from Bandura's (1986) general social cognitive theory, social cognitive career theory (Lent et al, 1996) intends to illustrate the complex interplay between self-efficacy and other key variables, namely, outcome expectations and personal goals, in people's life career development. While all three variables here are considered essential foundations and key mechanisms for people to exercise human agency, self-efficacy has received the most attention in the career literature. Research evidence concerning the critical role and function of self-efficacy has been well

documented (Lent et al, 1996; Betz, 1992; Lent & Brown, 1986; Betz & Hackett, 1981).

From a social cognitive career perspective, “self-efficacy is not a unitary, fixed, or decontextualized trait but rather involves a dynamic set of self-beliefs that are specific to particular performance domains and that interact complexly with other person, behavior, and environmental factors” (Lent et al, 1996, p. 380). Outcome expectations are defined as people’s beliefs about the consequences or outcomes of performing specific and given behaviours. While both self-efficacy and outcome expectations are acquired and modified through learning experiences, the former affect the latter more substantially given that the quality of one’s enactment could have strong impact on the outcomes. Personal goals are defined as one’s stamina to take particular actions for producing a purposeful outcome. Because people organise, guide and maintain their behaviour under the direction of certain goals, goals form the very mechanism inspiring people to strive for personal agency in their life career pursuit (Lent et al, 1996).

Lent et al (1996) postulate that the interaction between goals, self-efficacy and outcome expectations in the self-regulation system involve complex and interweaving interaction with one another. “For instance, goals are assumed to influence the development of self-efficacy, while self-efficacy and outcome expectations, in turn, affect the goals that one selects and the effort expended in their pursuit” (Lent et al, 1996, p. 382). Thus, it becomes quite clear that self-efficacy can hardly be regarded as an isolated factor; it only displays its vigour when it co-exists with other components, especially the other two central variables, i.e. goals and outcome expectations, in people’s social cognitive career system.

An understanding of the interplay of these three basic components in the formation and functioning of human agency, as Lent et al (1996) point out, helps to clarify and interpret crucial relationships between (a) people and their career-related contexts, (b) cognitive and interpersonal factors, and (c) self-directed and externally imposed impact on career behaviour (p. 374). These relational aspects seem to cover the broad spectrum of interactive dynamics in people’s life career span. Having a good look at these aspects may inform people about the complex nature of career construction, and enhance people’s coping skills in this process.

Career as Meaning Making

In searching for new directions of career theories, Collin & Young (1986) found that the existing career literature appears to have paid little attention to, among other things, contextual factors as well as people’s subjective perspective of career. They suggested three models, namely, ecological, biographical, and hermeneutical approaches, for theory

development. The ecological approach attempts to address interrelationships rather than cause and effect in life career path. The biographical approach treats people as acting agents in an open narrative of their life experiences. The hermeneutical approach refers to meaning interpretation which helps people to comprehend interrelational aspects in their life career ecology, and make sense of experiences in their biographical narratives (Collin & Young, 1986).

Expanding on the same conceptions (Collin & Young, 1988, 1992; Young & Collin, 1988), Young, Valach, and Collin (1996) formed a contextual explanation of career. While the two basic components, i.e. the person and the environment, are still the key variables in the system, the contextual approach takes a very different interpretation of the person-context interaction from those of traditional career theories. It is different in that its definition of context comprises of three salient aspects: multiplicity, meaning and interweaving. Multiplicity means that complex and multifaceted factors and interrelationships are involved in forming one's life career context. Meaning refers to one's subjective views in perceiving and explaining contextual events. Interweaving suggests that the interactions among multiple variables and one's meaning interpretation of them are open-ended and dynamic. As such, the feature of multiplicity can be perceived as structure of the context while the interweaving facet characterises how people and events interactively function in the contextual process (Young et al, 1996).

The underlying philosophy of this approach is that rather than breaking phenomena into segments, the wholeness of an event and the interpenetration of its features are well recognised. The conception here is parallel to "the metaphor of weaving a tapestry and creating a pattern by the interweaving of its threads" (Young et al, 1996, p. 479). Guided by this principle, the contextual approach maintained that (a) the context consists of multiplicity of possible connections and interrelationships, (b) people's perspective is critical as it influences what will be perceived and how it will be interpreted, and (c) interpretation remains open-ended as actors in a situation continuously make new meanings.

As has been illustrated and implied in the foregoing discussion, one's life career development means a very complex and dynamic person-in-context process. There seems to be no linear and fixed equation that can fully explain such a human experience. The bottom line here is that human behaviour can only be described and understood with its inner and associative meanings, nothing but the meanings, within the particular context. Life career experience is no exception. This calls for an integrated, reflexive, and most of all, open approach to construe human enactment in life career. The key constructs in the contextual model (Young et al, 1996) have addressed some of these main concerns. The three key facets, namely, context, interpretation and narrative (Collin & Young, 1986; Collin & Young, 1992; Young et al, 1996), co-exist with one

another and collectively constitute people's subjective career. Gaining a perspective of how these core constructs interrelate seems to be particularly heuristic in helping people search for, and make sense of meanings entangled in their career path.

Context

To perceive the complexity and multiplicity of the context, it is necessary to focus on time, space and inter-relationships. Time denotes the changing nature of human life while space signifies the setting where events and stories take place. Inter-relationships designate the interweaving characteristics of direct and indirect factors, and their complicated interactions within the particular time and space. An illustration of this interactive system of context may be derived from Super's (1990) developmental theory. The continuation of people's life journey requires constant role change. As life enters into the next phase, there will be a different setting, or 'theatre' in Super's team, for actors to perform their career missions. Along with this new phase of life, there may be change of old inter-relationships, and obviously, new inter-relationships may come into play in the process. For example, for school graduates entering the workforce, 'workplace' will replace 'school' as their primary life career theatre. While they may detach themselves from former classmates and school staff, they now need to interact with the new organisational structure, and build and develop new relationships with colleagues and supervisors in the working environment.

While Super's (1990) stage proposition here makes common sense and is still relevant, the post-modern constructivist-orientated explanations (see Amundson, 1994, 1995a; Collin & Young, 1992; Young et al, 1996; Peavy, 1993; Cochran, 1990) take more holistic, dynamic and open views in defining the nature and scope of career context, in which the time and space dimensions go above and beyond the spectrum set by the traditional stage models such as Super's (1980) and Gottfredson's (1981). The essential quality of context, hence, is to reflect a flexible, broad and interactive ecological frame that is not only inclusive of various human and social relationships, but galvanising to the interaction among these relationships.

In illustrating the determining context for one's career decision-making, Amundson (1995a) contends that elements like culture, economic and political events, the interpersonal roles, and the self-structure (e.g. self-awareness/concept, self-agency, etc.), are all intertwined in the making of one's career context. Collin & Young (1992) indicate that such context has been marked by rapid and dynamic transformations of "massive environmental, political, economic, social and technological change" (p. 3). Not only are various relationships interweaving in forming the context, but their changing potency may affect

one another and modify the quality of the existing context. As a result, the making of a new context can be constantly in process, and new and different contexts may emerge.

Needless to say, context can either facilitate or hinder people's exercise of personal agency and expression of inner-self. Social structure and its evolution can certainly yield important conditions in forming a favourable or disagreeable life career context for people (Hotchkiss & Borow, 1996). Analysing life career development from a sociological perspective, Hotchkiss & Borow (1996) suggest that factors such as parental work/occupational status, structure of the evolving labour market, and race and gender, could all become vital contextual effects that may nourish or block a person's career growth. While the sociological view on work does not reject the existence of the psychological inner-self in people's worklife, it does suggest that not only are individuals' subjectivity influenced by the existing social structure and norms, but people's options are often limited by the social context they are in.

The swift changes in the current world of work may also render pros and cons with regard to one's life and career. As Peavy (1993) has pointed out, these phenomenal changes in our post-industrial (PI) society have been fermenting the context that tremendously facilitates the life career enhancement of "the first class of people" and obstructs that of "the second class of people". The first class of people are those who are educated and trained to function well in an information intensive environment, and they possess the capacity and desire to lead lives characterised by high degrees of symbolic interaction. The second class of people includes youth, the unemployed, displaced blue-collar workers and families, minorities and the aged. This class of people are increasingly marginalised because they may lack the symbolic interaction skills required by the PI workplace. As such, societal changes can be influential in context formation and transformation.

Moreover, contextual circumstances may be moderated by other factors, especially self-structure related variables. For instance, a person who possesses transferable skills and knows how to utilise them may be in a more advantageous position to cope with contextual changes (Amundson & Poehnell, 1996). In a similar fashion, people who have acquired the integral life career attributes of 'moxie' (Amundson, 1996b) may have better chances of exercising their personal agency in a rapidly changing work environment. Originally, a slang term, the word 'moxie' means courage and energy. By adopting the term in a career development context, Amundson (1996b) defines it as an amalgamation of courage, assertiveness, energy, skills, competence and shrewdness that represent critical human quality for success in today's competitive labour market. Also, personal flexibility seems to be another pivotal attitude people need to employ when they encounter the challenging work context of the twenty-first century (Gelatt, 1989; Herr, 1993a,b). For example, one may

need to accept contract work or become self-employed when permanent and organisational jobs become scarce; one may gain constant retraining in order to facilitate the changing career needs; and one may need to adjust one's interest, and develop interest in new vocational areas where one may equally exercise personal potential and find rewarding experiences.

Interpretation

The person-environment interaction consists of both objective and subjective career. The former refers to the observed progress of the person through organisation or occupation, while the latter means individual perspective (Collin & Young, 1986). Objective career has historically been the centre of attention of career theories and research (for examples, see Williamson, 1972; Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Super, 1990; Holland, 1992). The exploration on subjective career has been a relatively recent phenomenon in the field (for examples, see Collin & Young, 1986, 1992; Amundson, 1994, 1995a; Young et al, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1990). As Polkinghorne (1990) states, the career field embraces these two seemingly conflicting views. That is, objective career accepts the tenets of natural science, sees human behaviour as analogous to the movement of natural objectives and being governed by the regularity of law. On the other hand, subjective career focuses on the ordinary assumptions of human freedom and responsibility.

Subjective career, or how actors perceive and feel about their life career enactment, is too pivotal to be neglected and rests on the essence of meaning making. One's career path is constructed by different life roles and events that are always comprised of certain meanings to the person. Because individuals' enactment is goal-orientated and purposeful, no career action exists without meanings attached to it. While the subjective career experience may substantially affect the objective career, there may be discrepancies between the two sides, and they may not parallel to each other (Collin & Young, 1986). This suggests that (a) there is an inter-relationship between the subjective and objective career, and (b) with the consideration of context, an observed objective role or event may be interpreted in diverse ways through one's subjective perspective.

Meaning interpretation, in this usage, becomes indispensable in one's subjective career. The central point is perspective-taking: different perspectives on the same event may generate different meanings. The perspectives one takes can significantly influence one's interpretation of an event or situation (Amundson, 1996a). Meanings in the life career process are dynamic and open for subjective interpretation since they can be negotiated (Amundson, 1994). The nature of negotiation connotes a sense of tentativeness for re-thinking, revision and re-explication. This may well lead to the opportunity of coming up with new ideas and career

behaviour. For example, being laid-off is usually a distressful experience. However, if perceived from a different perspective, this negative job loss experience can also be seen as an opportunity for a career change. Consequently, a new plan may be designed and initiated, and actions would follow to implement the plan. Amundson (1995a) refers to such a mechanism as the process of framing and reframing meanings in one's career planning and decision making.

Young et al (1996) define interpretation as the process by which people make sense of action and context. The constructs of human intentionality and goal orientation in action and context are particularly salient for interpretation. Manifest behaviour, social meaning, functional steps, elements and action are all connected in the interpretation process (Young et al, 1996). Meaning loses its essence and relevance if action is not described and perceived in the context in which it takes place. Meanwhile, as both action and context may change their courses or be modified, meaning making from contextual life career enactment remains flexible and open-ended.

It has been noted that interpreting life career experiences becomes possible only when each experience is recounted and discerned in its broad as well as specific context (Young & Collin, 1992). For example, in describing women's career development, the context of young women in a caring profession (Faltermaier, 1992) may differ from that of entrepreneurial women (Young & Richards, 1992). While sharing some broad psychological common denominators, the actions of these two groups of women vary in terms of coping with their particular career contexts. As a result, the meanings they draw from their career experiences may also differ. This is where the richness and validity of subjective career exist; this is what makes interpretation critical in studying people's life career path; and most of all, this is why it is so important to make sense of one's life career experience through the meaning making process.

Narrative

Interpretation becomes possible when events and situations occur in varied contexts. To a large extent, people live narrative lives. Subjective career is about interpreting what has happened and is going to happen in one's life career enactment. Narrative is considered an important feature of interpretation (Young & Collin, 1992). Not only can meanings be interpreted from what already exists, i.e. the past stories, but meanings can also be yielded from these events and situations for anticipating the future plan. In either way, "the interpreter translates according to her or his present and anticipated context" (Young et al, 1996, p. 490). While context is being influenced by, and presents, a blend of psychosocial

variables, narrative “is built from history, culture, society, relationships, and language. It embodies context” (Collin & Young, 1992, p. 8).

Taylor (1989) argues that human beings find the sense of life through articulating it. Such articulation, then, is cultivated by stories happening in our everyday life for narrative is a natural form of meaning making. In examining the core dimensions of human action, Polkinghorne (1990) proposes that the narrative scheme performs a central function in life career evolution. He states:

The narrative scheme is the intellectual process that relates human activities to one another and makes them meaningful. It reveals purpose and direction in human affairs and makes individual human lives comprehensible as wholes. We conceive our own and others' behavior within the narrative framework and through it we recognise the effects that planned actions can have on desired goals ...The ordering of relationships by the narrative scheme results from its power to bind a sequence of events into a unified happening; it makes individual events comprehensible by identifying the whole to which they contribute. (p. 94)

It appears that one of the essential qualities of human narrative is its coherence in constructing the sequence of events in the meaning making process. Cochran (1990) defines this phenomenon as ‘holistic construction’ that reflects a coherent whole for further refinements, extensions, and revisions.

Such coherence incorporates socially constructed meanings into one’s subjective worldview, and vice versa. According to Young et al (1996), human goals and intentions that are formed through social discourse tend to contribute to the establishment of coherence within each narrative. “A coherent narrative is one in which there is a sequence or temporal ordering of events that make sense to the person” (Young et al, 1996, p. 491). Meanwhile, rather than preceding other dimensions of the narrative, coherence is constructed simultaneously with them. Coherence allows the narrator/actor to search for meaningful explanations in understanding what has happened in his or her life career path (Young et al, 1996).

The nature of coherence, or holistic construction (Cochran, 1990), in the development of life career narrative, may be demonstrated more explicitly by the cycle of repetition and rhythm in human life. According to Cochran (1990), such a cycle is composed of four phases, namely, incompleteness, positioning, positing and completion. Incompletion concerns the arousal and unification of an enduring structure of desire. While segments of events or stories seem to be scattered over one’s lifeline, the narrator has the desire to unify them into a definite intention, and to transform them into a larger and full story. Positioning refers to an adjustment of circumstances. It shapes a composition of being in the

longer and larger story, during which the narrator collects and refines relevant contents drawn from his or her personhood. Positing represents the enactment of position. Having positioned oneself, one takes action to actualise the spirit of one's being. The actor performs life career episodes within dramatic contexts and the series of sub-plots shape the main storyline of the full narrative. Completion signifies the end of one's positioning and a period of life; it can come at any stage of one's life and career. Completion concludes somehow what was aroused in the beginning, when there was a sense of incompleteness. Even though both positive or negative senses may be entangled in ending the larger and full story, the narrative serves to elevate a transient sense to an enduring quality of being for a life career period (Cochran, 1990).

These four phases constitute a consistent flow of the beginning, the middle and the end of a full story that expresses meanings intertwined within. As seemingly scattered events are integrated into this flow, they merge to unfold unified themes underlying the structure of the narrative. This enables the actor/narrator to be aware and make sense of meanings drawn from career enactment.

"The narrative is not a reproduction of events but a construction that the teller thinks the other should know for some reason" (Young et al, 1996, p. 490). The narrator can not obtain this goal unless he or she is actively involved in organising and interpreting the narrative. In this respect, the holistic construction of narratives opens a reflexive channel of meaning making in life career enactment.

In identifying narrative's relationship to career and action, Young & Valach (1996) manifest several important points. First, not only does narrative serve to construct and facilitate intentional, goal-oriented action, but it can also unify separate, unrelated actions into a coherent and continuing flow of meanings. Secondly, narrative renders a guide for action. While career is constructed within the present narrative frame, enactment and meaning making provide implications for future career direction and endeavour. Thirdly, people do not live completely in narratives. That is why action has to be stressed in everyday life; action consists of both practical measures in dealing with objects, and symbolic demeanour to encounter signs and symbols over one's life career span.

Conclusion

The foregoing literature review of precipitating factors of individuals' life career development depicts a complex picture. Each influence plays an important role in the overall schema.

It has been suggested that career development is a lifelong process, during which a person takes on different roles and deals with dynamic changes and transitions. Life means career, and people frame and reframe their self-structure, and exercise their agentic enactment in constructing

their life career path. Thus, career development is about the interaction between the person and his or her environment. The traditional theoretical approaches tend to focus on observable process or objective career, in the person-environment relationship. Although still relevant, the objective career alone does not provide sufficient explanation about what career means to the actor who functions as an agent in the process.

This calls for the understanding of people's subjective meaning making or subjective career, within diverse contexts. In light of more recent theoretical explanations and research on subjective career, constructivist-oriented notions regarding contextual complexity and multiplicity, narrative construction and meaning interpretation, are examined. It is assumed that people's career evolution demonstrates a complex person-context interweaving process from which individuals draw meanings for their life career missions, and construct their ways of being in the current world of work.

Understanding career development from such a convergence of integrated perspectives may be helpful to researchers and practitioners working in the fields of education, vocational psychology, vocational guidance and training, career counselling, organisational development and human development. Likewise, the increased awareness toward this end may also serve to enhance people's psychological strength, agentic endeavour and practical competence in constructing their own career pathway.

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