Chapter 1: Understanding Educational and Career Transitions: A Brief Review of Implications from Career Theories

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Introduction

Career Theories are instrumental in career counselling and guidance. Career theories serve as frameworks where career behaviour are expressed and organized into meaningful constructs for understanding, hypotheses are proposed on the relationship among different career constructs are derived and tested in research, and career intervention strategies are extrapolated and used in practice (Brown & Associate, 2002; Leung, 2008). To prepare young people in secondary schools for their future educational and career transitions, teachers and counsellors have to begin with an understanding of the spectrum of career theories that have been developed and their major tenets on career choice and development.

The purpose of this article is not to provide a summary of different career theories. Summaries of career theories are available in many existing textbooks and handbooks. Instead, the major objective is to compare and contrast different career theories along two thematic questions related to students' career and educational development and transitions. The first question is "how to make a career decision?" The second question is "what could be done to help and guide students through their school-to-work and school-to-life transitions."

HOW TO MAKE A CAREER DECISION?

Career theories have different perspectives on how to make career decisions. First, the early trait-factor approach suggested that a "matching" approach would be most appropriate (Dawis, 2002). The trait-factor approach involves understanding the various traits and characteristics of an individual that are related to making a career or educational choice, including but not limited needs, values, interest, and skills and ability. The trait-factor approach also requires the decision-maker to understand the characteristics of their options (that is, occupations and education options), so that he/she could identify the choices that have the best "match" with his/her traits. The trait-factor approach is actually the foundation of later theories such as the work-adjustment theory and Holland's theory of career personalities and interests (Holland, 1997). Matching is now conceptualized as a "person-environment fit" process, which acknowledge the complex interactions that take place when individuals and environments both seek to maximize the degree of "match" or "fit" with the other party.

"Matching" and maximizing person-environment congruence is an important perspective and career teachers and counsellors are often attracted by the easy-to-understand concepts and tools developed under the trait-factor tradition (e.g., interest assessment and the use of Holland's theory). Whereas some students would benefit from a person-environment fit model of career guidance, many students would need a stronger dosage of intervention. For instance, some students would need to explore how their past, present, and future experiences are linked together in order to determine their career and education direction. Some students might be confused about how to make use of their self-

understanding to decide on their careers. Meanwhile, students might experience barriers in pursuing occupations that are congruent with their characteristics due to various, social, economic, and environmental limitations.

The developmental approach offers an important lens to understand career development and choice (Savickas, 2005; Super, 1990). The developmental approach focus less on matching but more on understanding the developmental process and tasks that individuals are confronted with. Super's developmental theory is the most prominent career theory under the developmental tradition. Super's conceptualized career development as a lifelong process involving many transitions and choice points. The school-to-work transition that young people's experience could be understood as a process of working through career developmental tasks, including the tasks of crystallizing on a career and life direction, specifying on specific educational and career choices, and engaging in actions to implement these choices. Consequently, the most important question is not on how to make a career/educational decision, but how to cope with the developmental tasks that the young person is confronted with. Successful mastery of career developmental tasks is are instrumental to establishing life equilibrium, transition from confusion to stability, and passage from one vocational developmental stage to another.

The developmental perspective encourages counsellors and clients to review their development, to understand how career and life development could be richly weaved together, and how various life roles, including the role of workers, could be synthesized and unified toward for higher purposes and goals. Career choices are decisions that an individual made at various time points, aiming to implement the evolving self-concepts that emerged at different life transitions and stages. Hence, sound educational and career decisions require the person to examine the various aspects of his/her self-concept, especially the emerging and un-fulfilled aspects of one's self-concept that have to be fulfilled in the context of one's current career stage and life transition.

A third perspective is the social-cognitive approach (Lent, 2005). The social-cognitive approach is linked to social learning tradition of career theories, which conceptualized in the person as an active agent who is capable of shaping his/her environment yet at the same time being shaped by various learning experiences. A key construct in the social cognitive approach is the self-efficacy, which could be defined as "a dynamic set of beliefs that are linked to particular performance domains and activities" (Lent, 2005, p. 104). According to this perspective, self-efficacy development is most instrumental to career choice and development. A young person who believes that he/she is competent, has confidence on his/her own ability, will initiate activities to develop various career/educational interests, set personal career and life goals, endure difficulties and barriers on the way, and persist to attain career goals and objectives. According to the self-efficacy perspective, the question of "how to make a career decision" should best be reframed into questions such as "how to develop and modify self-efficacy percepts," "how to expand interests and facilitate choices," and "how to identify, analyze, and overcome career choice barriers."

A fourth is a sociological perspective (Johnson & Mortimer, 2002). The sociological perspective is built around empirical findings from sociological research which suggested that system-level variables such as race, social class, and gender are instrumental to restrict one's career choice and development. Social and economic inequality, prejudice and stereotype, socioeconomic status, and other structural barriers (e.g., educational tracking) are instrumental in obstructing the career choice and development of individuals

and restricting social mobility. Structural inequalities and barriers create classes of individuals who are "privileged" and "under-privileged," which affected a person's approach to career decisions and the opportunities available. Consequently, the question of "how to make a career decision" should best be reframed into "how to maintain and raise the educational and career aspirations of young people," "how to empower a person to overcome the various structural barriers limiting his/her choices," and "how to serve as a social advocate on behalf of the counselling profession to promote social justice."

Each of the above four perspectives (trait-factor, developmental, social-cognitive, and sociological) contributes to the understanding of career development and transitions. An understanding of these perspectives allows counsellors to and students to see the complexities behind the transitions, and to identify strategies and approaches that would serve individual educational and career needs. In the next section, we discuss strategies and intervention approaches derived from these perspectives.

INTERVENTION TO FACILITATE CAREER TRANSITIONS

The focus of this section is career intervention strategies. According to the trait-factor tradition, the key is to help a young person understand his/her personal characteristics and traits. This could best be done through tests and assessments. Through providing a person with information about himself/herself, as well as information about the world of work, the person would be able to make informed decisions, and the correspondence of personal trait and the expectations from the environment would lead to career fulfilment and satisfaction. This could be an efficient approach to many students, but there is always of a danger of relying on tests and assessment devices that are far from perfect in terms of reliability and validity. In addition, students might not have the capacity and readiness to understand his/her personal traits (and the complex data derived from tests), and there might be barriers and issues that are blocking their self-understanding and motivation to engage in career and life planning.

A counsellor has to move from a narrow "test and assess" mode to a more comprehensive career guidance approach, and to make use of the developmental perspective to inform on intervention strategy. For instance, a counsellor should identify where are a young person is in mastering the tasks of crystallization, specification, and implementation, and to help him/her to manage the tasks that they face in their transition. The counsellor can place a primary importance on self-understanding, on making decisions, or on actions, depending on the developmental needs of the student. In the process of clarifying one's vocational self-concept, the counsellor should engage the student in "conversations that explain vocational developmental task, exercises that strengthen adaptive fitness and activities that clarify and validate vocational self-concept" (Savickas, 2002). The use of tests and assessment tools is only one aspect of career intervention, within a spectrum of interventions that aim to strengthen a person's career adaptability, to equip life-skills development, and facilitate awareness of developmental needs and resources.

At times, the focus of intervention could be on self-efficacy and competence development. This is especially important in educational contexts where students are un-motivated, low in self-esteem, and under-achieved due to deficits in their family or educational experience. In such instance, the counsellor should aim at (a) providing learning experiences that

stimulate competence and interest development, (b) providing opportunities where positive and accurate performance feedback to students, (c) encouraging students in conversations and activities to review and challenge inaccurate self-efficacy percepts, and (d) assisting students in setting and implementing educational and career goals.

Meanwhile, career guidance could address a "social system" dimension. Career intervention could help students to explore how their perceptions about the prestige and gender-type of occupations might have limited their career choices and their potential self actualization. The counsellor can also help a student to cope with social and economic injustice and inequalities that have inhibited the career development and choice of students. The movement from a guidance to an advocacy role is always difficult and uncomfortable for counsellors and teachers. However, those who are in helping and teaching professions have to examine their own professional and ethical values, and at times might have to step out of their comfort zone to advocate for a justice and equality, on behalf of the client and the profession that they are accountable to.

CONCLUSION

Career theories are fundamental to those who practice career guidance and intervention. Without theoretical understanding and guidance, career guidance would be scattered, disjointed, random, and lacking in organization. It is all too easy to practice career guidance based on one's personal experience. However, it will not be good for the students we serve and to our profession. Career development and counselling is a field that has a strong foundation in theory and research, and practitioners should use them as their source of wisdom and knowledge-base to guide interventions.

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