# A Meta-Theoretical Framework for Career Practitioners

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## Abstract

Over the last decades the academic community has produced an impressive array of innovative theories and ground breaking evidence within the sphere of career development. The publications have extended the limits of our understanding and give invaluable guidance for effective, evidence-based career practice. But the bridge between research and practice is not always as well trodden as we might hope: For many practitioners, the task of synthesising these disparate theoretical and empirical literatures may be insurmountable. This paper presents a new model, a meta-model, which incorporates the concepts lying at the heart of the key ideas which have emerged in recent years. Drawing from over 50 theories and approaches, this model offers an overarching framework which sets out how the concepts within the different theories interact, overlap, and complement each other. The model is intended as a tool which practitioners and students can use to help them to make sense of the theoretical landscape, and as a framework which could allow them to bring together the many theories to underpin their practice.

**Keywords:** theory, practitioner, meta-theory

## Introduction

The changed and changing nature of the world of work requires a new conceptualisation of career and numerous theories have emerged over the past 20 years which share some assumptions and philosophies. The research which has been conducted extends the boundaries of our understanding, but the smorgasbord of theories which has emerged is not easy to understand. The challenge for career practitioners is to make sense of the vast range of theories, to work out how they fit together, how they overlap, and how they differ; to identify which terms are synonymous, which theories address the same aspect of career development and ultimately, to work out how the theories can be of value to their clients.

In this paper I present a model which describes and integrates the key aspects of current thinking within career theory and which could provide a starting point for a structured approach to career practice. The model is neither normative (how people ought to engage with their careers) nor descriptive (how people actually engage with their careers) but aims to describe the assumptions, implicit or explicit, which underpin the theories and ideas within current career thinking. The model is presented in Figure 1 and the rest of the paper explains the five elements of the model. The elements are described discretely but in practice they interweave and develop concurrently rather than sequentially.

The model is not intended as a comprehensive account of the career development process. It focuses on career theories and does not address the skills (such as transition skills or career management skills) which are needed to translate the career thinking, which is represented here, into meaningful action.

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The ideas are drawn from specific theories and theoretical constructs referenced throughout but there are many career theories which have not been incorporated. I hope that this paper will provide a starting point for a dialogue and that if key elements have been omitted or misinterpreted, that these can subsequently be incorporated or the model modified.

This is not the first integrative framework to have been proposed. Many career theories acknowledge the multifactorial nature of career choice and development, and a number such as Blustein (2001); Chen (2003); Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2002); Patton and McMahon (2014); and Savickas (2001) have explicitly drawn theories together. The model presented here differs from these in its aim. Where previous analyses are intended to be explanatory, the model presented here is proposed as a tool for practitioners and is intended as a starting point for theory-driven career practice.

**Figure 1: A meta-theoretical framework for career practitioners**
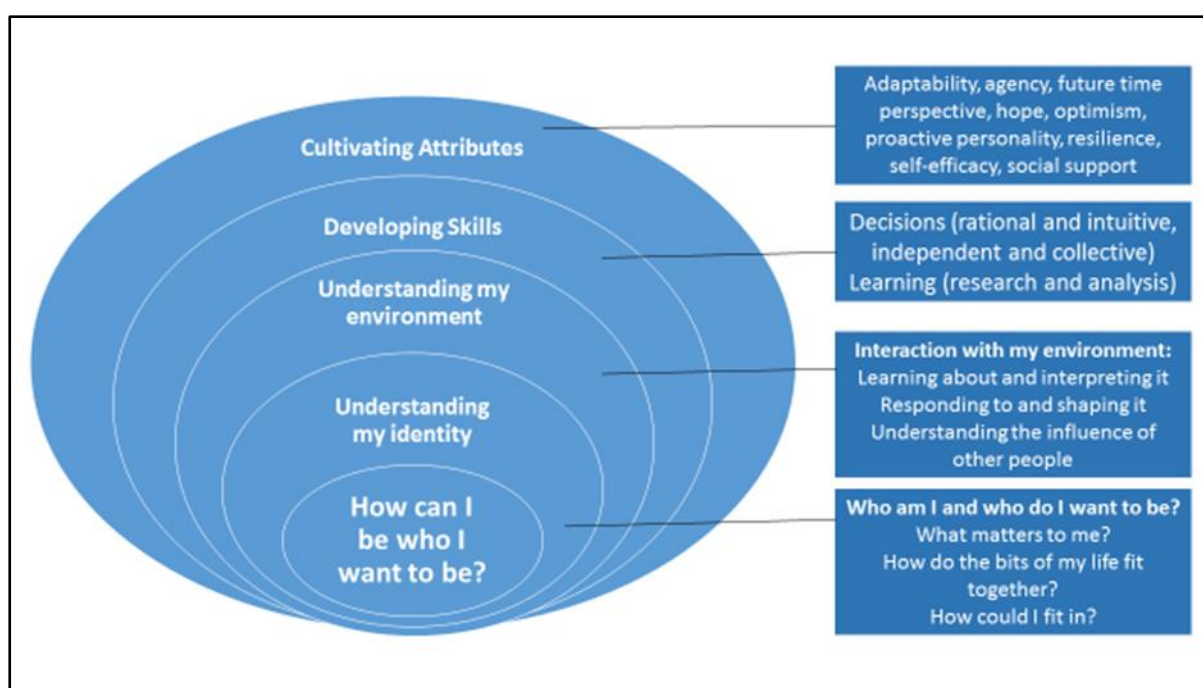


## Overarching Question
*How Can I Be Who I Want to Be?*

At the heart of the model lies the fundamental aim of career practice. The core goal for practitioners is to support individuals as they work out 'How can I be who I want to be?' (Blustein, 2013; Maslow, 1943; Tinsley, 2000).

This is a broad question and does not specify *career* or other similar terms. Contemporary theories such as life design (Savickas, 2012), the psychology of working (Blustein 2013), the kaleidoscope model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) and the life-span life-space approach (Super, 1980) acknowledge that the answer to this overarching question might not include a career or a job, although career theories tend to be predicated on the assumption that a career or job could lead to self-actualisation, or could enable self-actualisation in another arena, for example, by providing the necessary funds, or by enabling the individual to serve society (Arulmani, 2011).

Implicit in this overarching question too, is a refusal to make a clear distinction between work and life. This echoes the 'holistic' philosophy seen in life design (Savickas, 2012) and narrative

approaches (Cochran, 1997) and is conceptualised in spiritual career theories in the notion of unity (Bloch, 2004). The blending of work and non-work identities has also been explored in occupational literature (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). Congruence here too is important. The value or relevance of congruence varies depending on the particular factors which are being measured (Tinsley, 2000), and evidence suggests that a person-environment fit which is based on an identity match (rather than the career interests which are central to Holland's 1997 trait and factor theory) has a significant impact on job satisfaction (Perdue, Reardon, & Peterson, 2007; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003).

### Understanding My Identity
*Who am I and who do I want to be?*
*What matters to me?*
*How do the bits of my life fit together?*
*How could I fit in?*

Underpinning much current career thinking is the notion of identity. This has been central to career theories in the form of the self-concept since it was introduced to the field by Super in 1963. The overarching question for career thinking, identified above is 'How can I be who I want to be?', and in order to answer this, people need to develop a clear sense of their current and their desired identities.

The first aspect 'What matters to me?' concerns meaning, and explores values (Brown, 1996; Colozzi, 2003) and purpose (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Seligman, 1998). The second question addresses the different aspects of life and encourages individuals to conceptualise their lives and futures holistically (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Savickas, 2012). Identity issues such as gender (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Gottfredson, 2002), class (Heppner & Scott, 2004), and sexuality (Fassinger, 1995; Gedro, 2007) are relevant here. Disentangling the constructs of culture, race, and ethnicity has proved tricky for career theorists (Stead, 2004) but all have a bearing on our social identities and our career thinking. Racial identity theory (Helms,

1990) and the impact of racial salience (Helms & Piper, 1994) provide frameworks to help understand the influence of race and ethnicity. Theories of career relating to individual difference could be incorporated here, such as theories of personality (Myers-Briggs & Myers, 1995) and career interests (Holland, 1997), or theories which combine interests, abilities, and personality such as Ackerman and Beier (2003).

The invitation to consider the different aspects of life allows the individual to address possible tensions or synergies between the different aspects of their lives. An individual could reflect on how to combine their roles as, for example, mother and worker (Hewlett, 2002), or how to marry their own wishes with those of their community (Arulmani, 2007). Here too the individual might be encouraged to think about the role they might want or need work to play in their lives, whether it is a way to live (Blustein, 2013), a route to life fulfilment (Dik & Duffy, 2009), or a way to contribute to their community (Arulmani, 2011).

Our social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) is the part of our identity that derives from our similarity to others. It includes the attributes and experiences that are shared with others in a group and is a reflection of how we see ourselves within society and how we imagine society sees us. The question identified here is 'How could I fit in?', which invites people to consider their own identities in terms of the groups they might align themselves with (Schneider, 1987). Career theories which address the issue of social identity include career identity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Meijers, 1998), life design (Savickas, 2012), possible selves (Ibarra, 1999; Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012), and role identity theories (Ng & Feldman, 2007; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Cultural identity is one aspect of social identity, and this is explored in the application of cultural and cross-cultural psychologies to career theory (Stead, 2004). The developmental-contextual approach (Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986) explores the influence

of socioeconomic and cultural factors. For those making career decisions within a collectivist culture, the notion of personal identity is bound up with the idea of group identity (Hofstede, 1980). An exploration of the central question 'How can I be who I want to be?' will incorporate consideration of group identity as well as individual identity (Leong, 1996), and career decisions may be based on the goals of the family or culture more than the implementation of the self-concept (Patton & McMahon, 2014).

## Understanding my environment
Interaction with my environment:
Learning about and interpreting it.
Responding to and shaping it
Understanding the influence of other
people

The second arena which individuals need to understand is their environment, acknowledged as fluid, interwoven, and constructed. The first task for individuals is to learn about and interpret their environment. The notion of "environment" here is a broad one and includes the world of work, the opportunities available, the routes, paths, and the possibilities (Roberts, 2009). Individuals engaged in this process would develop an insight into how the world works, an understanding of currency such as social and cultural capital (Chudzikowski, & Mayrhofer, 2011; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) and an appreciation of the fluid nature of the environment and the impact and opportunities presented by chance events (Bloch, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2003).

The second aspect highlights the dynamic nature of the relationship between the individual and the environment, focusing on the ways in which the environment influences the individual (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Law, 1981) and in which the individual can influence the environment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). This interaction between the individual and the environment is core to complexity theories (for example, Goerner, 1994) and Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) careership theory too

situates the interaction between the individual and their environment at the heart of career decision making.

Particularly influential within our environments are other people. Traditional approaches have advocated the value of independent thinking and decisions (Gati, 1986; Holland, 1997) but more contemporary career theories acknowledge the inevitability of the influence of others and the benefits it can confer. Theories focus on a range of different kinds of relationships including family and friends (Agarwala, 2008; Schultheiss, 2003), role models (Gibson, 2004), and parents (Sawitri & Creed, 2016).

## Developing skills
Learning: research and analysis
Decisions: rational and intuitive,
independent and collective

In order to negotiate their career development, individuals need to know how to learn. Theories can incorporate the skills to research (gather information) and analyse (make sense of the information). These theories can be applied to both one's self (for example, Kelly's personal construct theory, 2003) and to the environment (for example, Law's career learning theory, 1996) and include the notion of social learning (Bandura, 1977; Krumboltz & Nichols, 1990). The blueprint framework (see Hooley, Watts, Sultana, & Neary, 2013) drawing heavily on Bloom's taxonomy of learning (Bloom, 1976) provides a learner-centred framework for career development, incorporating many key aspects of learning.

From Parsons (1909) onwards, decision-making has been central to career development theories. Traditional models of career state explicitly or implicitly, that a rational approach to decision-making is the best way to reach the best conclusion (Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009; Yates, 2015). More recent evidence indicates that career decisions are often made below the level of consciousness (Greenbank, 2014) incorporating emotions

as well as cognitions (Kidd, 1998). Research too indicates that a combination of rational and intuitive strategies better reflects real world decision-making (Ferreira, Garcia-Marques, Sherman, & Sherman, 2006) and may be the strategy most likely to lead to good career outcomes (Singh & Greenhaus, 2004). Decision-making research even goes so far as to suggest that for complex, probabilistic decisions, such as those we face when making a career choice, the intuitive decision-making system is likely to outperform the conscious rational system (Dijksterhuis, Bos, Nordgren, & van Baaren, 2006). The notion that career decisions should be made independently too has been called into question, both from an empirical perspective (Brosseau, Domene, & Dutka, 2010) and a cultural one (Chao & Tseng, 2002), so the notion of collective is incorporated here alongside independent decision-making.

### Developing attributes: Characteristics which can help me to reach my goals if I cultivate them
*Adaptability, agency, future time perspective, hope, optimism, proactive personality, resilience, self-efficacy, social support.*

At this final level the personal attributes which can support an individual to identify and attain their identity and career goals are set out. Self-efficacy (Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999; Taylor & Betz, 1983), optimism (Creed, Patton, & Bartram, 2002; Garcia, Restubog, Bordia, Bordia, & Roxas, 2015), social support (Hirschi, Niles, & Akos, 2011;), hope (Diemer & Blustein, 2007; Hirschi, 2014), future time perspective (Atanásio, Paixão, & da Silva, 2013), resilience (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012), and adaptability (Goodman, 1994; Savickas, 1997) have all been shown to have a positive impact on career outcomes, including career decidedness, motivation, and job search. Agency is a core pillar of many of the theories and is linked to motivation and satisfaction (Chen, 2015; Deci & Ryan, 2011).

### Conclusion

Career theories hold the promise of more effective career practice which can provide better support to a wider range of clients. Our collective understanding of career development and career decision-making, however, has pushed forward in so many directions, at so many levels, and influenced by so many different theoretical approaches that as a body of work, it has become too vast and amorphous to be easily grasped or translated into practice. This paper presents a meta-theoretical model of career theories. My aim is to offer something which captures the latest understanding of the arena in a way which is both comprehensive and comprehensible, and which can offer practitioners a basis for theory-driven and evidence-based practice. The model presented here is not the finished product, but my hope is that it will stimulate a debate and start a process of refining and re-defining towards a meta-theoretical framework which can offer a valuable contribution to career practitioners and career                                      practice.

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