



Principles of Adult Career Development

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Abstract

The major approaches to career counselling in the 21st century post-modern world are summarised, after a brief précis of the history of career development. The works of Super, Schlossberg, Hansen, Savickas, Gelatt, and Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz are highlighted as examples of new ways of thinking about career development. Each theory is briefly described with examples of its application to career counselling.

Key words: post-modern, 21st century, career development, career counselling, adult career development

Once upon a time people entered an occupation when they completed their education, whether they had only a little schooling or had completed a postgraduate degree. They then stayed in that occupation until they retired or were no longer able to work. The process of choosing that occupation in the first place was often culturally determined by family history and circumstances, by the opportunity structure, by the needs of their community, and the like. Individual interests and abilities might have come into play, but they often did not.

The Changing World of Work

But the world has changed and is continuing to change. And one of the changes relates to how individuals enter, maintain, and leave occupations. Economic, political, and societal changes have accelerated in the 21st century and have affected individuals as well as communities. The nature of the relationship of men and women to work

has changed, more so in some places than in others, but no community is exempt from seeing these changes and having to adapt to them.

The most visible of these changes is that people frequently are not able to stay in one job or even one occupation for life. In the United States, for example, it is estimated that the average person will make 6 to 10 major shifts in employment, and even more changes of jobs. These changes come about because of a variety of circumstances. Technological change has meant that many occupations no longer exist or opportunities to work in certain fields have diminished. Farming, for example, employs fewer and fewer people as machines take over work formerly done by hand and as large enterprises take over family farms. Manufacturing employs fewer people as tasks are done by robots or other advanced manufacturing techniques. Telephones are answered automatically, often obviating the need for operators. The

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list is long and differs according to locale and the industrialisation of the community or country, but few places have escaped the impact of these changes. And it is important to comment here that although for some, these changes are most unwelcome and disturbing, for others, they provide opportunity for more satisfying and economically comfortable lives.

The changes described above have not been orderly or universal. In the United States, there were major immigrations at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. These immigrants came from many countries and also from the farms of the United States to its cities. Even countries with little external immigration have experienced this internal migration, and for many it has been an unhappy one. Jobs in cities are not as numerous as those who desire them, and unemployment has been rife in areas as diverse as Southern Africa and Ireland.

Brief History of Career Development

Frank Parsons

Parsons, considered by many to be the first identified proponent of career development, lived in Boston, in the United States, at the beginning of the 19th century. He believed that it was possible and necessary to help individuals make good decisions about what work to pursue, and he believed that one could do so by learning about oneself and the world of work and applying “true reasoning”, that is, making good decisions. From these beginnings has arisen the large and complex field that includes theories of career development and practices of career counselling. I cite this very abbreviated history to place in context my next sections, in which I will discuss some of the current ideas about how to

help individuals navigate the career transitions necessitated by the 21st century world of work.

Recent Theories of Career Development and Career Counselling

Donald Super

Many extremely intelligent and insightful professionals have written about career development and career counselling, far too many to discuss here. I shall briefly describe the work of a few that have an impact, in my opinion, on understanding the needs of individuals to navigate the post-modern world of work. Super (Goodman, 1994) updated his career development theory to include the possibility of recycling his stages, rather than seeing them as unidirectionally developmental. He also added the term *resilience*, also called adaptability, to describe what he thought was necessary for adults to manage the changing world of work. Why has the term *adaptability* not caught on? Perhaps because adult career development in general does not attract a great deal of attention in the counselling literature. Perhaps because the attention adult career development does attract has been largely focused on the personal issues connected to job loss and unemployment, or on the strategies necessary to finding new employment. Perhaps the term has not caught on because we are uncomfortable with the fact that adaptation is a continuous process; we retain the childhood wish of someday being and feeling “grown up”.

Nancy Schlossberg

Schlossberg (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) discussed adult career development in

the context of adult transitions in general. She proposed that people undergoing similar transitions have more in common with each other than can be determined by their age or stage in life. Thus, a newly unemployed 35-year-old man has much in common with a 62-year-old woman if both have just lost their jobs. Schlossberg's model, which is described below, has been considered an assessment model, as counsellors and other career practitioners attempt to understand the particular circumstances of each client.

Schlossberg's model includes four components, each of which begins with the letter S, thus the 4 S transition model. The first, the *situation*, includes the following elements:

- Trigger. What was the cause of the transition? For example, a job seeker may just have completed training, been let go for cause, been let go because of a reduction in force, or have chosen to leave a job to move nearer to family. Any of these and many more could be the trigger that created the transition.
- Timing and concurrent stress. When did the transition happen in the course of individuals' lives? Were they healthy, with healthy parents and family support? Did the transition happen when the individual was well equipped to manage it, or ill equipped? Was the individual managing other life stressors such as a new baby or a geographical move? What may be very stressful at some life points may be a minor nuisance at others.
- Role Change. A man who was the primary breadwinner for the family who becomes a stay-at-home father after losing his job, has sustained a great role change. A woman who changes positions from one call centre to another has not. It is important to determine the role change involved in each individual's transition.
- Previous experience with a similar transition. Some individuals have chosen to change jobs and been successful at that change; some have had job change forced upon them and have managed it well. Others in similar conditions have found that their lives changed for the worse. Some people find that having handled a similar set of circumstances gives them confidence; others feel dread at having to cope again. Assessing both the facts and the feelings will help determine next steps.

The second S in the Schlossberg schema stands for the characteristics of the *self*. Although not meant to be a comprehensive mental health screening, the following should be considered in the light of the transition being experienced:

- Salience. How important is work to the person? Is it solely for the income, in which case any job that pays the equivalent will do? Is the work central to the individual's identity?
- Balance. How is the individual balancing life roles? This component often offers an opportunity to discuss spirituality, family, and other aspects of a full life.
- Resilience. Looking at resilience often raises some of the issues discussed in the section on previous experience described earlier. Has the individual bounced back from other life challenges? How hardy are they in the face of difficulties?

- Self-efficacy. Is the individual in transition confident of his or her ability to handle this life event? Self-efficacy is determined by individuals' assurance that they can handle this particular situation, as distinguished from self-esteem, which is a more global confidence. Self-efficacy beliefs can be modified by learning coping strategies and by being reminded of past mastery of similar events.
- Meaning-making. A woman lost her teaching job. She decided that this would be an opportunity to study counselling and develop a new line of work. She made meaning out of her transition by deciding it created an opportunity. Not all transitions can be seen as positive, but when there is a bright side, the ability to see it is a marker of a strong sense of self.

The third S in the system is *support*. Generally defined as those people, things, and ideas that help you get by. John Donne said, "No man is an island." The Beatles said, "I get by with a little help from my friends." Some of the elements of support that come into play during times of work transitions are:

- Feeling positive about yourself. There are people in our lives who are drainers, who make us feel discouraged and unworthy. Then there are those from whom we come away feeling energized, encouraged, capable, and valuable. These are the kinds of support we need during times of transition. And it may be good to spend less time with the drainers.
- Practical help. This type of support may include providing information, networking referrals, taking care of children during interviews, the loan of a nice briefcase for an interview, and the

like. A career counsellor may provide some of this type of support, as well as encouragement.

- Spiritual support. This type of support is more difficult to quantify, but nonetheless important. For many, spiritual support is provided by their faith, for others it is not tied to an organised religious practice. For most, but not all, it is connected to a belief in a higher power.

Strategies are the fourth S in the system. There are essentially three:

- Responses that modify the situation. This might mean getting a new job, acquiring a new skill or new degree that makes it easier to find work, or perhaps moving to another geographical area that has better opportunities.
- Responses that change the meaning of the transition. This recalls the woman discussed earlier who lost her teaching job and decided it created an opportunity. We believe, however, that it is cruel always to suggest making lemonade when life has dealt you lemons, although for some people it is possible.
- Responses that help to manage stress after it has occurred. Even if it is not possible to modify the situation or change the meaning of the transition, it is important to stay healthy during the process. Teaching stress management strategies can be an important component of career counselling.

Sunny Hansen

Another important contributor to the literature on adult career development is L. Sunny Hansen (1997, 2002). Hansen asserted that it was most appropriate to

consider career development within the holistic framework of life planning. She described six life tasks, modified later (Hansen & Tovar, 2013) to the following:

1. Finding work that needs doing in changing global contexts.
2. Attending to our physical, mental, and emotional health.
3. Connecting family and work (negotiating roles and relationships).
4. Valuing pluralism and inclusivity.
5. Managing personal transitions and organisational change.
6. Exploring spirituality and life purpose.

Added to the Schlossberg transition framework, we can see a role for career assistance emerging as one that takes into account individuals' entire life space, the socio-political-economic context, the others in their world, and their interests and values. We begin to see that a simplistic matching theory of career decision-making is not adequate for the world of the 21st century.

Mark Savickas

Savickas (2010) and his colleagues built on the work of many previous theorists to develop their life-designing rubric. The word *design* embodies an active connotation and implies that the individual is the creator of his or her future. Savickas (2003) has also been active in promoting a narrative approach to career counselling. In this approach, adults in transition are encouraged to "tell their story". This approach is particularly helpful with cultural groups for whom story is the preferred method of communication, especially between elders and younger people, who may well be adults themselves. Some of the questions that Savickas suggests that may assist individuals in telling their stories follow:

1. Whom do you admire? Whom would you pattern your life after? Whom did you admire growing up? How are you like this person? How are you different from this person?
2. Do you read any magazines regularly or watch particular television shows? Which ones?
3. What do you like to do in your free time?
4. What is your earliest recollection?

Using these questions can assist career practitioners in helping their clients think through the decisions they are facing. Savickas (2003) suggests that it can be helpful to encourage clients to frame their decision as a problem. For example, instead of saying I need help planning my next steps in finding a job, clients might say, I don't know what to do to get a job. Framing it that way may lead to an answer as they pursue the questions listed above.

H. B. Gelatt and Kathy Mitchell, Al Levin, and John Krumboltz

Two other theories that discussed career counselling strategies and which I have found to be immensely helpful in my work are those of Gelatt (1991) and Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz (1999). I discuss them together here because they similarly addressed the uncertainties of life and proposed ways of helping clients see the positive aspects. Indeed, Gelatt calls his system positive uncertainty. And Mitchell et al. speak of changing one's perspective, that is, reframing, by viewing undecided as open-minded. This formulation encourages clients to see uncertainty as an important step in decision-making. A career counsellor's job then is to help individuals resist premature foreclosure, allowing themselves the discomfort of

ambiguity and uncertainty. Mitchell et al. also coined the term *planned happenstance* to emphasise that although life presents many chance events, individuals can learn to capitalise on them.

Planned happenstance proposes that chance favours the prepared mind (attributed to Pasteur). Most school children have heard the story of Archimedes running naked through the streets of Sicily shouting “Eureka”, having “discovered” specific gravity while in the bath. Mitchell et al. encouraged counsellors to teach their clients to develop their curiosity, using examples such as the discovery of Velcro or penicillin. Clients are helped to, “generate, recognize, and incorporate chance events into their career development” (p. 117).

Mitchell et al. (1999) proposed five skills to promote using chance events to increase career options:

1. Curiosity: exploring new learning opportunities.
2. Persistence: exerting effort despite setbacks.
3. Flexibility: changing attitudes and circumstances.
4. Optimism: viewing new opportunities as possible and attainable.
5. Risk Taking: taking action in the face of uncertain outcomes. (p. 118)

Gelatt (1991) described his original formulation of positive uncertainty in a book entitled *Creative Decision Making*, and he elaborates on his thoughts regularly in his blog: <http://hbgelatt.wordpress.com>. In this

system, there are four paradoxical principles:

1. Be focused and flexible about what you want.
2. Be aware and wary about what you know.
3. Be objective and optimistic about what you believe.
4. Be practical and ‘magical’ about what you do. (pp. 7-10)

These four statements seem to me even more apt in the 21st century. In this world of seemingly constant change, one must decide and be prepared to change in many aspects of life—thus positive as well as uncertain—and decisions about work are clearly an example of this.

Summary

In the preceding paragraphs I have provided a brief summary of what I see as the major approaches to career counselling in the 21st century post-modern world. Although students and clients usually wish or need to make quick decisions about the direction of their education or job search, each of the above-described formulations encourages taking some time to make good rather than quick decisions, to be effective rather than solely expeditious. This may mean developing what have been called Plan A and Plan B. Where Plan A may involve finding a job immediately to feed and provide shelter for oneself or one’s family, Plan B may involve more long-term action such as education or training, or simply more time to make a good decision using one or more of the systems described earlier in this paper.

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