



## **Deconstruction, Reconstruction, Co-construction: Career Construction Theory in a Developing World Context**

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### **Abstract**

There has been a consistent challenge since the introduction of career theories in terms of their more westernised conceptualisation of career development. In view of this critique, the relevance of newer developments in career theory for a developing world context is explored in this article. Specifically, the article focuses on constructivist and narrative approaches to career development and, in particular, considers the more recent and promising emergence of career construction theory. Several critical constructs of career construction theory are examined in relation to their meaning and relevance in a developing and less westernised world context. More specifically, cultural and contextual issues at the macrolevel of society, the mesolevel of family, and the microlevel of self are considered in terms of the strengths of and challenges to career construction theory. The article is concluded by exploring possible ways of understanding more westernised conceptualizations of career in less westernised and developing world contexts.

**Keywords:** career construction theory, constructivism, culture, developing world, non-Western

The invitation to write this article suggested exploring key career constructs from their westernised standpoint and to examine the extent to which such constructs are relevant to individual career development in non-Western and developing world contexts. There was also a concomitant call to consider non-Western constructs that may need to be accommodated in career theory and service delivery in developing world contexts. The invitation came at the same time that Sharf's (2013) sixth edition of his popular text on career theory and counseling was published. Sharf states in his text that, "No theories of career

development have been formulated to apply specifically to one culture or another" (p. 17). It is a statement that I find difficult to reconcile with the consistent, indeed persistent, criticism of established career theory as being both culturally bound and contextually blind (e.g., Stead & Watson, 2006). At best, much of career theory to date has been applicable to limited cultural, gender, and socioeconomic populations (whether this was their intention or not) and the generalization of these theories to other population groups has been a major concern expressed in the career literature.

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The present author does agree with Sharf's (2013) statement that, given global cultural diversity, relating culture and context to career constructs becomes a complex issue. One way to consider this complexity is to use the process concepts of deconstruction, reconstruction, and co-construction which are part of the lexicon of newer movements in career theory such as Savickas's (2013) career construction theory. These are useful concepts for describing how career theory and practice continue to strive to respond to the complexities of career development in the twenty-first century (Watson, McMahon, Mkhize, Schweitzer, & Mpofo, 2011). The deconstruction and reconstruction of career theory and practice has ranged along a continuum from those who would argue for the generalization of established career theory across cultural and social contexts to those who advocate the development of indigenous career psychologies (Watson et al., 2011). In between these extremes of the continuum lie newer theoretical and counselling approaches that suggest that social constructionist, hermeneutical, and narrative approaches may help to reconstruct career psychology in its response to contextual and cultural factors (Collin & Young, 1992; Kuit & Watson, 2005; Mkhize, 2005; Mkhize & Frizelle, 2000). For instance, several authors have proposed that social constructivist and narrative approaches would help in the reconstruction of career theory and practice in developing world contexts such as Africa (Maree & Molepo, 2006, 2007; Watson & McMahon, 2005). Specifically, these approaches show promise in contextually and culturally locating career issues and in encouraging individuals to construct their own reality within the contexts and cultures in which their career development occurs (Watson, 2006). Concomitant with newer, more qualitative career theory development has been the development of qualitative career assessment processes that encourage individuals to contextually consider their career development (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2005a, 2005b; McMahon, Watson, & Patton, in press-a, in press-b).

The theoretical and assessment movement towards constructivist and narrative approaches reorients career psychology towards a more contextually and culturally sensitive reconstruction of its identity in the twenty-first century (Sharf, 2013). These approaches suggest the deconstruction of grand theoretical narratives of career development and the construction of local, contextual, and cultural narratives (Watson, 2006). There is clearly a need to consider the redefinition of career psychology in developing world contexts. Watson (2009), for instance, suggests that career psychology in South Africa may "need to be deconstructed in order that the discipline may be reconstructed" (p. 142). This redefinition would help address persistent criticism of earlier constructions of career theory.

### **Deconstructing Career Theory**

The debate in the career literature on the relevance of established career theories to contexts other than those they were developed in is well-documented. It is not the intention of this article to review the extensive criticism of more western career theories; rather this critique is considered against the more recent development in career theory and practice of Savickas's (2013) career construction theory in order to establish how the field is addressing the critical issues of context and culture in career development.

At the one end of the continuum of the critique mentioned earlier is the indiscriminate use of established, more westernised career theories on population groups from diverse cultures and contexts. Here the debate has largely centred on the adoption rather than the adaption of career theory (e.g., Maree & Molepo, 2006; Stead & Watson, 2006) or, to use the terminology of the present article, the absence of any attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct career theory in order to ensure that it is culturally and contextually relevant (Watson et al., 2011). Watson and Stead (2002), for instance, expressed concern at the start of the millennium that career psychology in South Africa

reflected “a loosely defined framework of western theoretical constructs and measures” (p. 27). Within the South African context there was widespread adoption of Super’s (1990) career developmental theory, particularly his stages and ages, during the second half of the last century (Stead & Watson, 1998), leading to the indiscriminate use of constructs such as career maturity and life roles. Further, the differentialist psychometric tradition in South African career guidance has negatively impacted more disadvantaged populations.

Stead and Watson (2006) have called for career theory and practice to be more firmly embedded in the national contexts within which it is practised and they express concern about Euro-American perspectives that are regarded as “the touchstones for the advancement of a contextually appropriate career psychology” (p. 181). Stead and Watson challenge career theorists and practitioners to consider the meaning of career constructs within the contexts in which they work. Their argument suggests that, while established career theory may be applicable to diverse population groups, its applicability needs to be determined. Stead and Watson discuss the call for the construction of indigenous career theories but caution, along with others in the literature, that an exclusively indigenous career psychology may result in insularity and cultural specificity (Mpofu, Bakker, & Levers, 2011). Mpofu et al. (2011) have shifted the debate more to the centre of the continuum in calling for theorists and practitioners to “reconfigure traditional models; and implement novel, culturally sensitive strategies in assisting clients” (p. 315), a perspective that suggests reconstruction and co-construction. Similarly, Watson and Fouche (2007) have called for the renovation and contextual adaptation of career theories that are reflective of more westernised and higher income countries.

The development of career theories and counselling models that reflect the tenets of constructivist and narrative

approaches is in part a response to the need for career psychology to adapt to an increasingly diverse clientele both in terms of cultural and contextual variables. Further, the complex and evolving nature of work over recent decades calls for a deconstruction and reconstruction of established career constructs if they are to remain contextually relevant (McMahon, Watson, & Bimrose, 2012; Stead & Watson, 1998; Watson & Stead, 2002). Theories such as Savickas’s (2013) career construction theory significantly move career psychology forward in its need to remain relevant in the complex world of work of the twenty-first century. However, we need to critically engage with rather than uncritically adopt such newer theory development and consider again issues of relevance and applicability within non-Western and developing world contexts.

### Reconstructing Career Theory

It is beyond the scope of the present article to consider career construction theory in detail. The reader is referred to Savickas’s (2013) most recent and definitive description of this important theoretical development in career psychology. This article focuses on several core tenets of career construction theory and attempts to constructively consider the questions these tenets raise anew for career psychology to grapple with. The tenets chosen could best be grouped within the three systems of influence proposed by the metatheoretical Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006) of career development, that is, the individual system (consisting of intrapersonal variables), the social system (which includes family, community, and peers), and the environmental-societal system (which includes socioeconomic factors and the employment market).

### Environmental-societal Career Influences

**Industrial and postindustrial societies.** Importantly, career construction theory recognizes the increasingly temporary nature of work and recommends that individuals need to

become adaptable to macrocontextual career influences in order to “prepare themselves for possibilities” (Savickas, 2013, p. 149). Savickas (2013) believes that the recycling and reengaging process involved in career adaptation “occurs more frequently in postindustrial economies” (p. 157), and that the world of work has moved on from the greater career stability more evident in industrial societies. This macrocontextual influence on career development needs to be carefully considered in non-Western, developing societies. For instance, sociologists would argue that we are presently in a stage of transition from industrial to postmodern societies (Beck, 2005) in which postindustrialism is a highly western-centric concept that has limited application in most developing world contexts (Gibson, 1993). If we accept this argument then most individuals in developing world contexts may still be working or seeking work in a mix of pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial economies where prescribed, rigid, and hierarchical work definitions may still exist and limit the need for career adaptation. Chope and Consoli (2007) have pointed out, for instance, that many non-Caucasians work in a world of “diminished employment opportunities, discrimination and the denial of equal education opportunities” (p. 13).

Savickas’s (2013) definition of career adaptation makes sense in a postindustrial work world (as he points out) but may be more difficult to interpret in a work world that perpetuates an underclass of underemployed, underpaid, or unemployed workers. There is a Nigerian folk idiom which states that poverty transforms a free person into a slave. In this regard, Watson (2009) has discussed environments of career oppression in which the realities of macrosystemic factors constrain individual career development. How one defines *possibilities* in such depressed working environments becomes a challenge. It also raises a question about the relevance and validity of newer conceptualisations and reconceptualisations of career development, that is, are they

implicitly/explicitly structured within western conceptions of the evolving, global nature of work? Further, Savickas argues that development is driven by “adaptation to an environment rather than by motivation of inner structures” (p. 147). The challenge then for career practitioners working in more developing world contexts is to consider whether individuals can evidence career adaptation in depressed career development environments. How do career practitioners nurture career aspirations and possibilities that attempt to rise above the contextual realities of individuals’ lives while, at the same time, acknowledging the recognized career development tasks of circumscribing and compromising career aspirations in relation to the realities of a prescribed working world?

Career adaptation is conceptualized as occurring in “a changing landscape” (Savickas, 2013, p. 150) but one wonders how much the landscape can change when macrosystemic factors entrap individuals low down on the career ladder. In this regard, Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani (2004) discussed sociopolitical factors in India that entrench populations at the bottom of the ladder and refer to the “psychological stranglehold of caste” (p. 88) and the difficulties in career development of rising above this macrosystemic influence. Within South Africa there are historic, political and economic factors that have impacted the labour market with only 40.4% of the working age population (defined as between the ages of 15 and 64 years) economically active and employed (Statistics South Africa, 2011). This depressing unemployment rate tells an even starker story when different South African population groups are considered, with Black South Africans representing 30.1%, and White South Africans only 5% of the unemployed population. Perhaps in a developing world context the career narrative for many individuals does not represent changing work landscapes but more the “stable medium” (Savickas, 2013, p. 150) that postindustrial societies have transformed from.



**Individualist and collectivist societies.** The debate on the generalization of career constructs developed within more individualistic societies to more collectivist societies is well-documented in the literature (see, for example, Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004; Maree & Molepo, 2007; Watson, 2008; Watson et al., 2011). This debate reinforces Blustein and Noumair's (1996) suggestion of an embeddedness perspective in which a range of macrosystemic factors such as culture, society, and historical context interrelate in their influence on individual career development. There is a need to reconsider, however, the issue of collectivist societies in relation to the interpretation of newer constructs such as those introduced in Savickas's (2013) career construction theory. Savickas moves career theory closer to an acknowledgement of the concept of a collectivist identity in his proposal that the self is not self-constructed but co-constructed through interpersonal interaction and that the self is "culturally shaped" (p. 148). However, there is room for debate about Savickas's statement that, "In the process of sense making, the idea of self as a separate person arises" (p. 148). The statement raises questions for us to consider, particularly within developing world contexts. For instance, how far does the process of individuation occur in collectivist cultures and could the individuation of self be a collectivist definition? In some collectivist cultures, for example in India and South Africa, individuation may even be disapproved of and interdependence promoted (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004; Watson et al., 2011). Such issues raise the question of whether the individual in a collectivist culture ever feels the need to move beyond co-construction of identity.

A discussion of career identity within collectivist societies also raises the issue of language. Savickas (2013) has pointed to the critical role of language when he stated that "we live inside language" (p. 148). Language shapes the formation of career identity and the co-construction of a career. Language defines how we

understand identity formation and work and, consequently, what we perceive that we need to adapt to. As Stead and Watson (2002) also stated, "constructs and their meanings are embedded in the cultural use of language" (p. 156).

In terms of identity formation, in certain African cultures the language of *I* is the language of *we*. What happens to the group happens to the individual and vice versa. Further, consider the language that gives meaning to the concept of work. Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani (2004) pointed to the conceptual language of work and career in India as contextualizing the work role as something that the individual grows beyond; there is a philosophy and spirituality of work expressed in the Indian language that differs from more westernised conceptions of the role of work. Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani concluded that "career development progresses in India in a manner that is quite different from the West" (p. 23). Similarly, within certain cultural groups in South Africa career development is defined more in terms of the collective good or the betterment of others (Watson et al., 2011). Thus work for Xhosa speakers could be defined as cultural duties, formal or informal in nature, activities that centre on the home role, in addition to the more westernised understanding of work as a job (Stead & Watson, 2006). Complicating our understanding and use of important constructs such as career adaptation is the question of where individuals lie on a continuum of individualism and collectivism. The influence of society is itself an evolving one, with many individuals in a state of cultural flux, moving through a process of socioeconomic development and global influence from traditional perceptions of career identity development to a more westernised understanding. In short, the meaning of constructs such as career adaptability will need to be defined and understood contextually.

**The culture of career theory.** Career theory and its use can be viewed as a macrosystemic influence in that

career practitioners in both developed and developing world contexts are guided by the theoretical perspectives they adopt. Savickas's (2013) career construction theory moves the discipline forward considerably in its metatheoretical perspective of career development. It makes an important contribution towards reconceptualising earlier, prescriptive theoretical definitions of career development. For instance, Savickas argues that, with the changing nature of work, the earlier metanarrative of career stages and tasks "dissolves with the loss of the predictable scripts and identified paths on which it was based" (p. 150). It is a point that has been made by Stead and Watson (1998) but in relation to career constrained environments when they criticise career development stages as having "always appeared artificial for most black South Africans" (p. 41).

Importantly, Savickas (2013) also has suggested the reconceptualisation of how we use established theories such as Holland's (1997) person-environment fit model. Career construction theory suggests that we could still use the language of types in order to understand how these develop within the narrative of individuals. However, the validity of career typologies needs to be approached with some caution within a more developing world context. While moving away from a psychometric definition of types makes sense in more non-Westernised contexts, there is still the challenge of understanding the underlying theoretical base of career typologies. For instance, in South Africa there has been consistent research to show that the concept of types, particularly when underpinned by a model such as Holland's hexagon, translate in differential ways dependent on socioeconomic status and cultural group (Nel, 2006; Watson, Foxcroft, & Allen, 2007; Watson, Stead, & Schonegevel, 1998).

### **Social Career Influences**

There is a recursive interrelationship between the different levels of systemic influences on career development. Thus,

while collectivist societies have been discussed as part of the macrocontext of society, the impact of social influences such as the community, family, and peers would reflect these broader systemic influences. In this subsection, the influence of the family (which in less westernised contexts is often representative of the community) is considered in relation to Savickas's career construction theory.

**Family and community.** The three layers of self-development proposed by career construction theory (Savickas, 2013) are discussed in the following section on individual career influences. Underpinning these developmental layers are the roles of family and community, roles which need to be considered within a developing world context. Savickas (2013) has stressed the essential role of family and community in early career development, referring to these role players as *guides*. There is consistent research in more developing world contexts that suggests that the role of guides, while critical in career self-development, is often a negative influence. For instance in China, research demonstrates that children are expected to internalize the omniscience of the parental role and that there is a cultural expectation of filial reverence towards parents who can be restricting guides in their children's educational and career development (Liu, 2006). In this regard, Chinese parents frequently expect their children to achieve well at the secondary level of education in order to ensure their enrolment at a tertiary education level and to choose careers that will enhance the reputation of the family (Wang & Wei, 1998).

The parental role as guide includes the function of career knowledge dissemination. This function is often limited by traditional conceptions of work such as those displayed by Chinese parents (Liu, 2006) or to limited understanding of work environments and career types. The latter has been demonstrated in South African research with Black adolescents (Watson, Foxcroft,

Horn, & Stead, 1997). Given these limited and limiting influences one wonders whether self-construction in some developing world contexts limits individuals to adapt to the subjective realities and perspectives of the guides they are exposed to.

### Individual Career Influences

There is an interrelationship between the mesocontextual level of social influences and the microcontextual level of self-development. What happens at the mesolevel impacts development at the microlevel. Savickas's (2013) career construction theory makes this very point, that self-identity in career development involves the internalising (or what Savickas refers to as *introjecting*) of family and social influences. Self-development in career construction theory is conceived as involving three developmental layers, those of actor, agent, and author.

There is a sequential relationship between actor and the second stage of self-development or construction, that of an internalized sense of agency. Savickas (2013) has defined choice of occupation as demonstrating that actors are "self-regulating agents" (p. 155). One wonders how limited that self-regulation may be in more developing world contexts where, for instance in India, fate rather than choice is identified as a determining factor in career development (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004). Consider too the earlier discussion of Chinese parents as guides and how their role may question how realistic self-agency can be in certain developing world contexts where guides and role models represent and reinforce dominant and prescriptive perspectives of career development.

**Career adaptability.** A core construct of career construction is career adaptability which Savickas (2013) has defined as consisting of several dimensions. In conceptualising the dimension of control, Savickas is sensitive to collectivist and individualistic contexts but argues that self-control is essential for both contexts. Savickas's view is that where career opportunities are more

limited individuals need to make such limited choices "personally meaningful" (p. 160). The latter phrase is certainly more challenging in a developing world context. The extent to which meaning may be found could be dependent in part on how narrow the range of options is. In contexts of under- and un-employment, does this imply that securing any work becomes a meaningful activity in itself?

Another dimension of career adaptability is that of career confidence. Savickas (2013) refers to the extant literature which relates issues such as self-esteem to career development. Career practitioners working in developing world contexts may have to consider whether such self-esteem is more related to meeting the needs of others or whether constructive self-esteem is lacking in certain cultures such as demonstrated in Meng's (2010) research on negative self-esteem in the career development of Chinese college graduates.

Savickas (2013) has recognised that development along the dimensions of career adaptability varies between individuals and that, dependent on context, for example, "deviant patterns of development" (p. 161) occur. Of course, the definition of deviant development would need to be considered carefully in more non-Western world contexts where conforming to societal and familial expectation may be considered the norm.

### Co-constructing Career Theory

In conclusion, the process construct of co-construction can be interpreted as a call for us to engage with theory development and, while recognizing the strengths of newer career theory development, also consider the use of such theory with diverse cultural populations in diverse and developing world contexts. The need to reflect on career theory development and its generalisability is, after all, not new to our discipline. Donald Super, whose theoretical model is a foundation for career construction theory, wondered about the generalisability of his perceptions of individual career

development. Super stated in an interview that “career development, for example, in some of the African and South Asian countries that I know is really a matter of fitting into what the family wants, what the family needs” (Freeman, 1993, p. 263). Indeed, while only briefly referred to in the present article, unpaid work within families and communities may be an important source of activity and of subsistence in developing world contexts.

Career construction theory encourages reflection and the need for theoretical adaptation over time. It suggests that career constructs need to be flexible and that career clients need to be adaptable given the constantly changing nature of the world of work in the twenty-first century. The present article considers the flexibility of some of career construction theory’s core tenets, particularly within the context of a developing world where work may be absent or where the meaning of work as a life role may be limited to the most basic need for survival (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004). It challenges career practitioners from developing world contexts to consider the relevance and generalisability of career theory when working with what Watson and Stead (2002) referred to as “non-career” populations—the underclass, the underprivileged, the disadvantaged, the disaffected” (p. 49).

Earlier Super was quoted on the generalisability of his theoretical model of career development. Savickas (2013) himself has reflected on his career construction theory. Specifically, Savickas (p. 163) wonders about the availability of the work role in relation to self-development and construction:

Of course, many people cannot pursue interests that lead to their goals and meet their need for self-realization. They must take the only employment available to them. This uninteresting work at least fosters adaptation as survival, if not adaptation as self-realization. These individuals must continue to use

leisure pursuits to construct and substantiate a self.

This quotation reflects a persistent concern expressed in the present article, that the *career* of career construction theory may need to be differentially defined in many developing world contexts. Whether the redefinition is that of the leisure role as suggested by Savickas and how that definition is challenged by chronic unemployment requires some consideration. For instance, given the recursive interaction of life roles where the absence of one role may impact on the other, the leisure role and its meaning may be affected by the absence of work and consequent survival-related activities. Indeed, unemployment itself as a term may need to be defined differentially in a developing world context where there is a lack of welfare and unemployment benefit systems. What is important in Savickas’s quote is the recognition that the role of work may not be the only life role where self-construction and adaptability occur. Nevertheless, Savickas concluded his seminal chapter by stating that the work role remains the life role where career construction makes most sense: “Adaptability instills the will and skill to direct one’s own work life; identity imposes meaning on vocational behavior and work activities” (p. 179).

The centrality or not of work in people’s lives becomes a challenge when considered in developing world contexts, particularly where career development contexts are depressed and negative. Watson (2010) has pointed to the possible social exclusivity of the term *career*, particularly in relation to the informal economy and activities aimed at survival. Stead and Watson (2006) suggested broadening the meaning of career to reflect all work undertaken by individuals whether such work represents formal employment or not. Similarly, Sharf (2013) concluded that a broader perspective may be required when considering diverse populations: “Perhaps the lifespan perspective has the most to



say about issues affecting culturally diverse populations” (p. 465).

The discussion about broadening our definitional focus from specific roles which may be limited in some developing world contexts could be generalised to the emergence of career narrative approaches (an integral aspect of career construction theory). Such approaches have been proposed as more sensitive to certain cultural groups and as a way forward for the field (Chope & Consoli, 2007; Maree & du Toit, 2011; Maree & Molepo, 2006). While narrative may be a way forward, career narrative needs to consider the absence of career in some individuals' narratives. For many individuals living in underdeveloped and developing world contexts, adaptation to life may be the major developmental task facing them. Interestingly, Stead and Watson (1998) suggested that self-concept development with disadvantaged South African populations may be better and more appropriately understood against Super's proposal of role self-concepts and that career self-concept development may realistically not be expected to take place in contexts that reflect chronic and even generational unemployment. This argument comes closer to Super's (1980) proposal that adaptation may be best found in the balance of life roles available to an individual: "it is in role shaping, as well as in the choice of positions and roles, that the individual acts as the

synthesizer of personal and situational determinants" (p. 285). Whether this then suggests role construction rather than career construction is worth considering, more so as Super suggested that simultaneous involvement across life roles may lead to a more satisfying lifestyle.

In conclusion, when significant new career theories emerge, they call for career practitioners to demonstrate career adaptation in contextualising their relevance to the population groups that practitioners most work with. Such adaptation is particularly crucial when career theory is applied in more nonwesternised and developing world contexts where the subjective frame of reference of such clients may be collectivist, where language has different connotations, and where career oppressive contexts challenge the meaning of constructing a self within the work role. The present article suggests that career practitioners themselves need to critically deconstruct and reconstruct the career theories that may inform their practice. In so doing, career practitioners can become active agents in assessing the relevance and generalisability of career theory to the non-career populations with whom they work. Further, through contextually adapting career theory to the realities of their clients' lives, career practitioners can help in the development of more appropriate and sensitive career theory.

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