Chapter 7

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN CAREER THEORIES: THE INFLUENCES OF CONSTRUCTIVISM AND CONVERGENCE

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The current literature in career theory reflects two key themes: the influence of constructivism and the ongoing drive for convergence of career theories. This chapter briefly overviews the history of career theories, and within the context of the need for a shift in philosophical underpinnings of career theory describes the core principles of constructivism and its role in the focus on convergence in career theory. Second, it explores two recent theoretical contributions which reflect developments in both integration and in the influence of constructivism in career theory. For the purpose of comprehensiveness, the influence of constructivism on the role of these influences in a number of emerging theoretical discussions is also reviewed.

The traditional approach to career needs to be understood in the context of an era in the world of work when vocational guidance was applied to decisions about jobs for life, usually at school leaving age. Indeed, knowledge about the world of work in order to facilitate career decisions at this time ensured that career counseling was largely seen as an objective cognitive problem solving process where matching knowledge about self and knowledge about the world of work was thought to result in a sound career choice. However, world of work changes have changed our understanding of career and career development. While the elements of the systems of influence on individual career behaviour are the same, their nature and their relevance to the individual and his/her career behaviour at different points throughout life are different. Career theories have broadened, new theories have been proposed, and the world of work has undergone dramatic and irreversible change (Amundson, 2005; Brown & Associates, 2002; Patton & McMahon, 2006). In today’s world, people change jobs several times in a lifetime, and occupational choice is only one aspect of a broad array of career challenges to confront. Career theories need to be appropriate for the complexity of individuals living in a complex world.

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J.A. Athanasou, R. Van Esbroeck (eds.) International Handbook of Career Guidance, 2008
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2008
However, the changes in the context of career and the broadening of the concept of career development have far outpaced the development of theory to account for it. Traditional career theories have been challenged as being too narrow, although the more narrow theories have attempted to acknowledge the influence of elements of the broader system in their revised formulations. Theoretical frameworks have been proposed to encompass elements of the social system and the environmental-societal system, and the potential for integration and convergence of theories has been explored (Chen, 2003; Patton & McMahon, 1999, 2006; Savickas, 2005; Savickas & Lent, 1994). Proponents of moves toward convergence in career theory (Chen; Patton, & McMahon; Savickas & Lent) have emphasised the importance of viewing the whole of career behaviour and the relationship between all relevant elements in the career decision-making process to each other and to the whole. In doing so, it is important that contributions from all theories are considered in exploring an individual’s career decision-making processes. Thus the theoretical map underpinning our understanding of career behaviour in the 21st century is markedly different from that which existed with the first publication of Parsons in 1909. Indeed Amundson (2005) asserted that recent advances in constructivism, systems theory, action theory and paradoxical theory have emerged to support individuals and counsellors in constructing personal development in a world of unprecedented and ongoing rapid changes occurring within the workplace and in individual careers.

The last decade has seen the most active growth in the development of theories about career behaviour since the decade following World War II. Patton and McMahon (1999, 2006) presented an historical overview of major theories of career development by using a content/process heuristic based on the work of Minor (1992). Early theories focused on the content of career choice, such as characteristics of the individual and of the workplace evolved and became known as trait and factor theories (e.g., Holland, 1985). Subsequent development in these theories based on the acceptance of greater individual and environment connection led to modified person-environment fit theories (e.g., Walsh & Chartrand, 1994). Theories which placed more emphasis on the stages and process of career development were proposed and became known as developmental theories (e.g., Super, 1957, 1990). Theoretical work first published during the 1980s and early 1990s focused on both content and process, including the interaction between these and the role of cognition in the process (e.g., Lent & Hackett, 1994; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002; Peterson, Sampson, & Reardon, 1991; Peterson, Sampson, Lenz, & Reardon, 2002). More recently, theorists have focused on constructivist influences in career theory and on approaches to convergence of the many career theories, with the field of career development theory continuing to proffer flexible and adaptive theory. In a recent overview, Guichard and Lenz (2005) identified three main characteristics evident in the international career theory literature: “(a) emphasis on contexts and cultural diversities, (b) self-construction or development emphasis, and (c) a constructivist perspective” (p. 17).