

RUNNING HEAD: MODELS FOR ANALYSIS

Context and Models for the Analysis of Individual and Group Needs

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Abstract

This paper summarizes those papers presented for the thematic stream *Models for the Analysis of Individual and Group Needs*, at the 2007 IAEVG-SVP-NCDA Symposium: Vocational psychology and career guidance practice: An international partnership. The predominant theme which emerged from the papers was that theory and practice need to be positioned within their context. For this paper, context has been formulated as a dimension ranging from the individual's experience of himself or herself in conversations, including interpersonal transactions and body culture, through to broad higher levels of education, work, nation and economy.

Models for the Analysis of Individual and Group Needs

In the 2007 IAEVG-SVP-NCDA symposium stream which addressed the analysis of individual and group needs, participants were challenged to consider the role of theory in research and practices, inclusive of individual, organizational, community, or government practices. A range of theories, many derived from the constructivist and social constructionist schools of thought, were discussed in relation to both research and practice. Discussions emphasized the need for practices to be located with the individual's presenting issue, within relevant *context*, and not from the standpoint of theory alone. With respect to a synthesis of models, this paper highlights the importance of viewing career and career development from the proximal and distal contexts of the person. Examples of practice or empirical studies have been included to expand upon the importance of context for the analysis of individual and group needs.

Context: A Metatheoretical Lens for Analysis

Participants within the symposium argued that the theories and practices of career development in the contemporary world-of-work have limited meaning unless they are situated in their specific context, and, in turn, understood differentially from other contexts. Context can be conceptualized as an abstract dimension extending from local to global; with local context at the level of the individual person and his or her proximal environment through to global context being at the level of distal societal environment which imbues the individual in a range of influences. Of course the notion of context is not unfamiliar to contemporary psychology and career development theory, take for example, its explicit positioning in the Systems Theory Framework (e.g., Patton & McMahon, 2006) and the Contextual-Action Theory (Young, Valach, & Collin, 2002); but we emphasize that theories and practices may be better understood and applied when situated within a dimension of

context. In this way, context can be taken as a metatheoretical heuristic (cf. Chen, 2003). It should be noted that although there is conceptual correspondence between the notions of context and culture (Young, Marshall, & Valach, 2007), they are not necessarily ethnically-bound concepts, as they may refer to practices associated with geographic location, social-class, organization, family, or work-team.

To illustrate the theoretical and pragmatic value of context as an organizing framework, Heppner (2007) set the scene for the symposium by drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model to consider vocational behavior in a globalized, multicultural world-of-work. Heppner suggested that the training of career development practitioners may need to be reviewed with respect to how it prepares practitioners to understand issues that are not fully appreciated within traditional theories (e.g., social class, internalized oppression). Heppner argued that an ecological approach would provide a means by which to include those issues which are presently excluded or inadvertently minimized in theory and practice. Heppner suggested that an ecological perspective would assist practitioners and researchers to think and act beyond the intrapersonal domain and to position the person within nested layers of ecological systems. She also suggested that future research and practice should include the development of methods to enable clients to assess the impact of their ecosystem upon their career.

Contextualized Sites for Analysis

In framing the analysis of individual and group needs from the perspective of context, we have formulated a summary of the papers and research outcomes around *sites* within contexts. The term site indicates a positioning within the contextual world of individuals, ranging from the proximal to the distal. We commence with the proximal site of conversation and end with the distal site of inter/national and cultural influences. This analysis is consistent with the tenets of the Systems Theory Framework which

comprehensively contextualizes the individual (Patton & McMahon, 2006) as an entity-in-context. Figure 1 depicts the STF and the range of influences that go to make up the individual in his or her context. The STF holds that an individual's experience of career is best understood when the entire host of recursively interacting career influences of the person's life are included in the formulation process, however significant they may be. The STF also offers a higher-level theoretical framework that facilitates scholarly endeavors to bring theories, research, and practices into a meaningful synthesis (McMahon & Watson, 2007a, 2007b). In this case, we have used the STF to structure our thinking on the research presented within the symposium.

Conversation as a Site. The constructivist and social constructionist approaches to career development have emerged as significant forces within contemporary vocational psychology (Young & Collin, 2004). Within the social constructionist frame, discourse is taken as the predominant and ineluctable fabric of psychosocial context. Conceptualizing the individual as a social entity-in-dialogue (cf. Sarbin, 1986), and using the Theory of Dialogical Self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993), McIlveen (2007) argued that personal identity and career identity were dialogical transactions inextricably bound to the historical, environmental, and cultural discourses in which a person exists and evolves (cf. Guichard, 2005). This approach assumes that identity is an ongoing story lived in conversations with oneself or others—real or imagined—in a feed-forward and constant process of editorial revision. McIlveen exemplified this assumption through a narrative career assessment and counselling procedure *My Career Chapter* (McIlveen, 2006). This procedure requires individuals to construct a short-story of their career by writing specifically in relation to the many systems of influences in their career lives. The resulting story becomes the grist for the counseling process of storying.

The Working Alliance as a Site. Extending from the site of conversation into the therapeutic domain, with respect to the microsystem of the career counseling relationship, Collins and Arthur (2007) argued that the working alliance is a site at which to understand and transcend cultural differences, either in counseling, supervision, or higher level processes such as organizational consulting. Working alliance has been defined in various operational terms (e.g., A. O. Horvath & Greenberg, 1989; Tracey & Kokotovic, 1989), but has been lauded as an important site for research in vocational psychology (Heppner & Heppner, 2003). In their work, Collins and Arthur formulated working alliance as extending from the usual micro-level through to the macro-systems levels. This inclusive model accounts for personal factors (e.g., family, personality, education), contextual factors (e.g., social norms, environment, rural/urban location), universal factors (e.g., spirituality, mortality, physiology), cultural factors (e.g., social class, ethnicity, language), and ideological factors (e.g., ageism, sexism, heterosexism, elitism, racism, and “ableism”). Their broad and inclusive approach echoes other approaches which specifically recognize the myriad systems of influences within the client-practitioner relationship (McMahon & Patton, 2006; Richardson, 2000).

Whilst suggesting that working alliance can include a host of intrapersonal through to broader cultural factors, Collins and Arthur included, moreover, the notion of ideological factors as being crucial to establishment of a wholesome working alliance. The recognition of ideological factors in the working alliance has implications for what goes on in counselling, because it is within the confluence of the client-counsellor dyad that ideologies may synergize or clash (cf. McIlveen & Patton, 2006; Richardson, 2000). The relevance of ideological factors was exemplified in the presentation by Castellini and Sacchi (2007) whose empirical study indicated that university students’ career choices with respect to occupational aspirations may be differentiated on the basis of political attitudes.

Learning as a Site. Learning and career development have a long association (Guichard, 2001). Bassot (2007) continued the social constructionist argument that self and career identity are personally felt as psychological experiences, but are also formed in social and cultural transactions. Bassot used Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the *proximal zone of development* as an explanatory model to argue that individuals engage in social construction of their career identities. This approach to the individual-in-context assumes that an individual may develop and evolve his or her career identity through engaging in communities of practice that enable him or her to reposition in a new discursive context. Bassot exemplified her theoretical assertion through a visuo-graphical career assessment and counselling procedure of "joining the dots". In this way, the client is given space to draw images of career, all the while engaging in dialogue with the practitioner. Through dialogical interaction the client moves from one place of understanding himself or herself in dialogue and learning through others, to another career identity. Bassot's approach reverberates the argument proffered by a number of authors that career intervention may be conceptualized as a learning process (see Heppner & Heppner, 2003).

In highlighting the important work occurring in The Netherlands, Oomen (2007) demonstrated how career development learning may be subsumed by a contextual system (i.e., a school), yet have a reflexive role in transforming the educational system. Oomen argued that the implementation of a career development strategy for school children, positively influenced the staff of the school by it being seen as a resource for school improvement according to national standards. In this way, students' learning transformed teachers' learning, thus being indicative of the reflexivity of engagement in discursive contexts and movement across zones of proximal development. Within the frame of adult lifelong learning, de Gregorio and Pavoncello (2007) presented a study demonstrating how Italian organizations' human resources departments have used career development coaching

for their employees as a process to enhance performance, and less so as a strategy for staff retention.

The Body as a Site. Wehmeyer's (2007) presentation of a study of persons-with-a-disability suggested that their attitudes of self-determination were related to life satisfaction. In view of the working alliance and issues pertaining to disability (e.g., "ableism" in the form of not being treated as an adult), one must reconsider afresh the assumptions of practitioners in client-counselor relationship with a person-with-a-disability. Gender and age were also shown to be issues in the career development of adolescents and young adults in Spain, particularly in reference to differential traditional cultural expectations pertaining to finances, family, and work (Sanchez et al., 2007). The study presented by Sanchez et al. highlighted that although young Spanish women were relatively free of gender-based expectations for themselves as women, young men held stereotypical views on what women should consider appropriate for their careers.

Work as a Site. Massoudi's (2007) study reaffirmed that the psychological experience of stress in the workplace was a phenomenon that could only be understood from a transactional perspective in which the individual's cognitive and emotional states and traits were interacted with work-environment factors. Horvath (2007), for example, suggested that Hungarians in their mid-twenties were experiencing angst as a "quarter-life crisis" due to issues pertaining to their transition into the workforce and the struggle to establish career stability in the early phases. Both studies reinforced the arguments that vocational psychology must reconsider the position, value, and meaningfulness of work in individual's lives (Blustein, 2006; Richardson, 1993).

A National Economic Site. By using South Africa as a case example, Watson (2007) emphasized that context must be considered from the level of the person through to the level of national economic, educational, and policy trends. Watson argued that within the South

African context, traditional theories predominantly based upon North American psychologies tended to have limitations upon their relevance and meaning. Watson suggested that there had been too much simplistic replication of theories and practices into new contexts with a result that the theories and practices are rendered inappropriate, and opined that theories may metaphorically get lost in the translation (also see Watson, 2006). Though there has been progress in the advancement of career development within middle- and lower-income nations (Hansen, 2006), and critical scholarship on its nexus with social justice (e.g., Irving & Malik, 2005), the transfer of theory and practices between lower and upper income nations may need to be given serious consideration in theory, research, and practice.

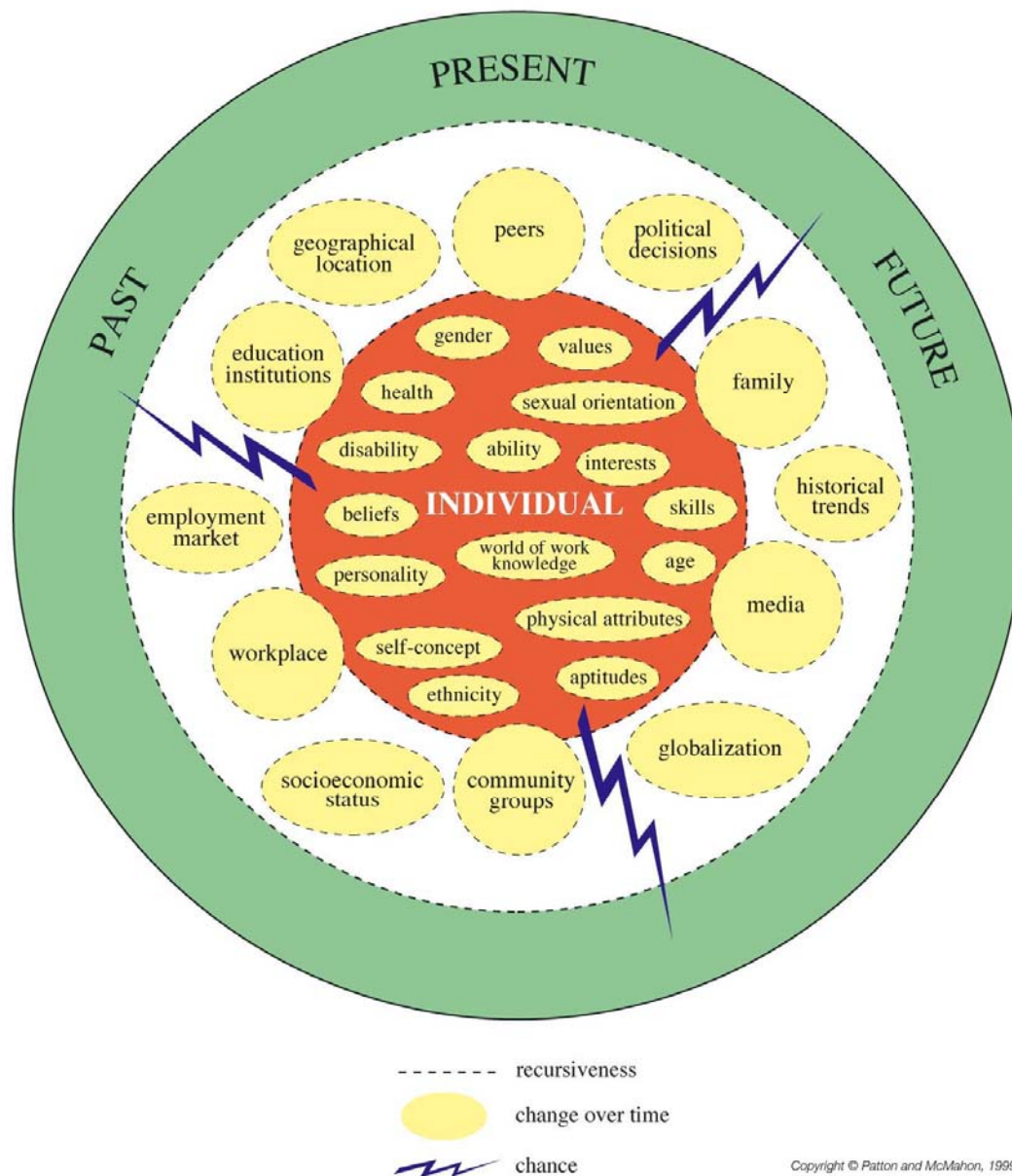
In summarizing the papers of the symposium, Chung (2007) extended Watson's high level analysis and raised concerns regarding the predominance of the North American approach and the pressing need for other nations' theories and practices to be raised and considered in a global context, rather than from the lens of a Western context. Chung used the term "globalocalization" to emphasize that we need to localize what we learn globally and noted that it is dangerous to try to talk about career development knowledge without understanding localization. Chung was not disparaging of North American theory and practices per se, instead he argued that healthy diversity of theory and practices was reliant upon the rise of other perspectives. He emphasized the importance of truly globalizing, rather than "westernizing" and the need for us to be more culturally sensitive with respect to our theory and our practice.

Conclusion

In summary, the symposium papers and discussions pertaining to the analysis of individual and group needs centered on the potential for context as a broad organizing framework for theorizing, for research and for practice. Discussions on defining context ensued, including a full focus on issues of diversity and inclusivity. In addition, the

recognition that context can be acted on by individuals, as well as impacting on individuals, was discussed. Finally, the importance of synthesizing the context of the practitioner and of the client was emphasized. Supporting meaningfulness in all work activity was expressed as a goal of practice. In recognizing the vitality of context, a concomitant goal of research and practice includes working toward broadening the range of people served by career development.

Figure 1. Systems Theory Framework.



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