Agnieszka Cybal-Michalska
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

The (meta)analytic value of career theory tenets: A contribution to the discussion on Mark L. Savickas's theory of career construction

Abstract: The article emphasises that an essential factor is the cognitive status of a theory which would help understand the dynamics of historical acceleration and related changes in the world of careers. Career development can be discussed in various analytical and interpretive theoretical frameworks underpinned by different conceptual tenets. In this context, the major challenge is to generate new approaches which would go beyond the boundaries defined by partial paradigms and contribute to formulating a clear career theory, providing a common point of reference for the community of career researchers.

Mark Savickas's career construction theory is analysed as a candidate for an epistemological approach to explain a wide range of processes involved in "organising a diversity" of career patterns within contemporary globalised society. Savickas's approach, reflecting the constructivist view on career development, is cognitively interesting because it considers vocational behaviours and their development in a processual way, including their holistic organisation.

Keywords: career, career development, career theories, Mark Savickas's career construction theory

Introduction

The acceleration of social life, dynamism in the complex world of work that undergoes permanent changes and a ceaseless flow of information and capital, as suggested by Manuel Castells (2007), all contribute to the quest for new paradigmatic solutions (Adekola, 2011, pp. 100-101). At the same time, research on time and social space, distinct to the career construct, analyses the properties of both emergence (how people experience time) and relativity (how people experience social space) (Arthur, Hall, Lawrence, 2004, p. 12).[1] Crucial in this context is the cognitive

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[1] The theme of vocational career and the need to generate new paradigmatic approaches, addressed in this article, are merely a part of the multicontextual account of career in a world where "career makes a career" (both in the theoretical and the research perspectives) presented by the author in

status of a theory that would account for the phenomenon of historical acceleration and, as phrased by Piotr Sztompka (2002), of "the triumphant present", therein the dynamics of change in the world of careers.

Given how dynamically the global world develops and how difficult it is to foresee what direction social change will take, a tendency may occur, as indicated by Raymond Boudon, "for the provisional character of interrogative practices and for providing *ad hoc* answers to questions about the relation between various elements of social reality.(…) 'A good theory (…) has an explanatory ability that encompasses a variety of important facts, including facts that are yet unknown'" (in Misztal, 2000, pp. 189-190). The logic of change in the organisational configuration of society is not easy to capture. Many theoretical frameworks of heuristic value undergo devaluation. Critically reviewed, wherein their limitations are revealed, they incline thinking towards "the need to design new analytical instruments" (Manterys, Mucha, 2009, p. VII) corresponding to the quality of contemporary society in a dynamic change process. Besides, unification and diversification – complementary, reciprocally influential processes instrumental to the current development of societies – form an additional background for the quality of transformations and variegations, where unification of the particular and particularisation of the universal have become a fact.

The legitimacy of career theory:
On the need to seek new paradigmatic solutions

Career development can be analysed and interpreted from various theoretical perspectives informed by different conceptual premises. Although attempts at classifying them have a well-established tradition, it is difficult to unambiguously order the multiple approaches. One reason for this is that they are hardly separable as, in terms of their temporal dynamics, they have been mutually inspirational, as a result of which it is possible to discern both universals and distinctive elements in the theoretical account of career, as well as in its empirical verifications and implications for practice (Paszkowska-Rogacz, 2009, pp. 24-25).[2] Demonstrating the difficulties in formulating and testing career theory, John L. Holland, the leading theoretician

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her *Młodzież akademicka a kariera zawodowa* [*University students and vocational career*] (Cybal-Michalska, 2013).

[2] Importantly, as indicated by M.B. Arthur, D.T. Hall and B.S. Lawrence, when an established theory proves its value in the light of new challenges and is anchored in practice it means that the theory has entered the phase of "routinization." According to Quinn (1988), a 4-stage process is characteristic of each theory, and it involves: initiation, uncertainty, transformation and routinization itself (p. 15). For example, "much current career theory based on psychology and social psychology has already been subjected to considerable empirical inquiry and has been put into practice in organizational career programmes (Brown, Brooks and Associates, 1984; Gysbers 1984; Hall and Associates, 1986; Miller, 1986). The person-environment fit model of Holland (1973) provides the basis for the Strong-Campbell interest inventory that is widely used for career counselling and placement.

of "vocational personalities," admits in the introduction to the 1997 edition of his *Making Vocational Choices*: "This book is my sixth attempt to create a more satisfying theory of careers. I never seem to get it quite right" (in Allison, 2007, p. 1). This short statement suffices to understand that the researcher has been compelled to reflect on the subject repeatedly, which suggests how challenging it is to grasp the complexity of career.

The literature offers various systematisations of career theory. In very broad lines, two major criteria of classification can be indicated: the theory's content (content theories; process theories; content-and-process theories) and the constitutive factors of career (prescriptive theories; life-cycle theories). With the "entity" that initiates and shapes career as the criterion of classification, individualistic and structural theories can be distinguished (in the former the individual is the main medium of career development while in the latter career development is an attribute of the organisational structure and depends on the organisational policy and quality of the internal labour market) (Miś, 2006, pp. 478-479). However, a certain "vagueness" in the inquiry into cause-and-effect relations among the various factors in the individual's career development does not mean an epistemological stagnation. In fact, contemporary attempts at formulating a holistic account of "career" entail crystallisation of new paradigmatic frameworks. In this sense, it is, indeed, urgent to generate new approaches that will overcome the boundaries of partial paradigms and, thus, prove relevant in the 21st century. As Ian I. Mitroff and Ralph H. Kilmann put it, the interdisciplinary discourse on career will facilitate "taking us beyond the limitations and confines of disciplines as we currently conceive them" (in Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 2004, p. 10). What is more, a question arises about how to "manage" the rich legacy of career theories of the 1990s, at the same time increasing their epistemological value (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck and Van Vianen, 2009, p. 240). To achieve this, the discourse insists, we need a clear and vivid career theory that may produce common points of reference for the community of career researchers. In this context, scholars ground their theorising attempts in a particular perspective, at the same time acknowledging other perspectives (as exemplified in James E. Rosenbaum's approach to "career mobility, which provides an alternate explanation for Berlew and Hall's (1966) psychologically grounded ideas on early career experiences"). Furthermore, we need also to interpret the findings of one perspective against another (as did Peter Herriot in "reinterpreting the work of vocational psychology from a social psychological perspective") and, above all, to develop an interdisciplinary career theory that would integrate the previously separated levels of analysis as well as contribute to new perspectives (Arthur, Hall, Lawrence, 2004, pp. 12-14).

Explanations of adult development are reflected Super's (1988) career concerns inventory and Schein's (1985) career anchors questionnaire…" (Arthur, Hall, Lawrence, 2004, p. 15).

Over the last four decades, diverse theoretical accounts of career development have proliferated side by side. The particular value of the career theory debate lies in that is replete with animated critique of the various theoretical perspectives. With their considerations involving various levels of generality, commentators and critics most often address the theories' inadequacy, incomprehensiveness and incoherence. The question of the adequacy of career theories becomes even more conspicuous when we consider their content. Ignorance of contextual issues, inattention to social inequalities, overlap of conceptualisations of many elements and segmentation both within individual theoretical models and within the whole problem field (Patton and McMahon, 2006, p. 7; see also, Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 2004, pp. 14-17) are the major problems identified in analyses of the structure of propositions.

The conceptual complexity of career, its multidimensionality (interplay of biological, cognitive, behavioural and social factors), multidirectional character (multiple advances and setbacks of career throughout the life-course), flexibility (possible development along various trajectories) and contextuality (historical, environmental and geographical conditioning of career development), all call for integrating micro-theories into a macro-theory (Bańka, 2007, pp. 70-71).[3] In this context, of particular interest is the 1992 conference devoted to *Convergence in Career Development Theories* (University of Michigan), attended the eminent founders of career theory: David L. Blumstein, Edward S. Bordin, Rene V. Davis, Holland, Robert W.E. Lent, Arnold R. Spokane, Bruce Walsh, Donald Super, Fred W. Vondracek. The participants discussed key aspects of career development theories, using a very peculiar language, seeking dialogue possibilities, creating "bridges" between theories and situating theories of vocational career development in a wider context of individual life careers (Paszkowska-Rogacz, 2009, p. 33). The conference showed the need for convergence in career development theories and the relevance of efforts toward developing an integrated career theory in order to – as underlined by Samuel H. Osipow – obtain a holistic picture of career development. Similar postulates are voiced by, for example, Gail Hackett, Lent and Jeffrey Greenhaus, who advocate developing a composite, multi-perspectival theory, as well as by Wendy Patton and Mary McMahon, who work with the systems theory, which can provide an overall framework for career theory within which to identify the common features and relationality in career development theories. Dependable studies on similarities and differences in current theoretical orientations are necessitated by the observ-

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[3] In an impressive catalogue of micro-theories potentially and actually applicable in career counselling, the author enumerates: "involvement theories, attachment theories, commitment theories, social and cultural competences theories, self-disclosure theories, autodetermination theories, flow of optimal experience theories, resilience theories, maturity and functional/dysfunctional immaturity theories, indecisiveness and undecisiveness theories, multiple role realism/maturity theories, human agency theories, learned helplessness theories, well-being theories, gender-role conflict and work-family conflict theories, locus of causality and control theories, Big Five theories, cultural conflict theories, cultural self-identity theories, separation theories, acculturation theories and individualism-collectivism theories" (Bańka, 2007, p. 69).

able proliferation of varied theories, whereby one needs to draw on more than one of them in order to capture, describe and interpret career development complexities (Patton, McMahon, 2006, p. 7).

Multiple contexts in which the career domain is explored lead to changes in theorising career. In this sense, as stressed by Paul J. Hartung and Phillip S. Jarvis, the construct of career development is undergoing a decisive paradigm shift: away from the notion of career development to the focus on development through work and other life roles the individual plays (Patton, McMahon, 2006, p. 6). Theoreticians have clearly focused on the constructivist underpinnings of career theory. Jean Guichard and Janet Lenz have identified three main characteristics in international career theory studies, namely: "(a) emphasis on contexts and cultural diversities, (b) self-construction or development emphasis, and (c) constructivist perspective" (Patton, McMahon, 2006, p. 3).

A review of the systematization of career development theories clearly refers to the interest in career issues entrenched in the USA. As implied by the foregoing, most theories of career development have been conceptualised and are empirically rooted in the socio-cultural and vocational contexts of the US realities, which makes them allochthonous in a sense. It is in the United States that the *Big Five Career Theories* were created (see, Leung, 2008, p. 127).[4] In using this epistemological legacy, it would be crucial to think in terms of cultural adaptation or modification. As Alvin Leung insists, there should

> be more 'indigenous' efforts to develop theories and practice that would meet the idiosyncratic needs in diverse geographic regions. Indigenisation of career and guidance theory and practice should aim to identify the universals as well as unique experience, constructs and practice that are specific to particular culture groups (Leung, 2008, p. 127).

Studies on the indigenisation of career theory include three groups of conceptual predictions. The first premise concerns exploration of particular cultural phenomena and their specificity in order to understand "how culture might intervene, moderate, or mediate the hypothesised career development and choice process" (Leung, 2008, p. 128). Increasing the comprehensiveness and explanatory value of theories requires critique and assessment of the ways in which selected variables (e.g. work adjustment, interests, etc.) are understood and interpreted in a particular culture, which allows a more precise grasp of the universals and the unique elements. It is also of importance to verify the hypothetical assumptions, examine the validity of relations among hypothetical variables and study the impact of a specific cultural

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[4] What is meant here is the theory of work adjustment (TWA) by Rene Davis and Lloyd Lofquist; the theory of vocational choice by John Holland; the theory of vocational development by Donald Super reworked into the theory of career construction by Mark Savickas; theory of circumscription and compromises by Linda Gottfredson and the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) by Robert Lent (see Solarczyk-Ambrozik, 2015, pp. 29-30; Leung, 2008, pp. 115-132).

context in order to update the premises and establish a new configuration of variables, which is supposed to foster theories and indigenous conceptual frameworks.

Critical reflection on the quality (or, rather, reliability) of theoretical perspectives must also include studies on the methodological instruments geared to the cultural nuances of the social and vocational scene. Designing or adapting career measurements for a particular cultural group should entail eliminating cultural bias.[5] The analysis of social, cultural and occupational conditions for indigenisation of career theory (therein cultural adaptations) is also linked to the hopes for the development of cross-cultural vocational counselling (Leung, 2008, p. 128). Even though such hopes are fully justified, one should not be deceived that the doubts involved can be entirely eliminated.

How vocational counselling will in fact be practised will depend, largely, on the cross-cultural skills of the counsellor. In this context, it is pertinent that counselling be viewed as oriented at "increasing the client's knowledge in a given field, developing his/her competences and, hence, supporting them as they cope with problems" (Kargulowa, 2010, p. 11). Consequently, the objective is not simply to use the categories derived from one's culture, adding, at best, new content to them; rather, the aim is to employ an emic approach in which "the native's" point of view is espoused. At this point, Super helpfully specifies the context. When asked by Suzanne Freeman "What do you see when you look forward in the area of career development and what is your vision?" he replied:

> We will have more valid theorizing and better adapted methods of putting the theory to work. For example, most of the work on multicultural counselling has not been on career counselling. It's been on how a person of one culture understands and relates to people or a person of another culture. There are some questions that have not been often or adequately addressed. What is the meaning of career in the mind of a person of culture X as compared to that in the mind of a person of culture Y? 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. But generally our notions of career development are somewhat different. And of course, there are subcultures here in the USA in which the differences may be real, if not

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[5] Undoubtedly, the development of culturally plausible measurements is important for testing career development theory in multicultural contexts. It is possible to distinguish several levels of modification (through intervention and evaluation) in adapting career theory to particular cultural contexts. S.A. Leung indicates three options: a) to adopt the measure with a minimum modification only in order to ensure linguistic equivalence in translating the notions into a language comprehensible in the target culture; (b) to assess the target measure psychometrically in order to make sure that the structure and properties of the instrument correspond to those included in the literature so as to establish one scale for different cultures and, if necessary, modify the content and structure of the measure based on empirical outcomes; (c) to revise and adopt the target measure by including the chief cultural elements which are central to the concepts to be measured in the local context and assess the modified measure psychometrically (Leung, 2008, p. 128).

as striking as the differences between, let's say Nigeria or Kenya on the one hand and the USA on the other. Do the sub-cultural differences that exist in the USA really make any difference in the validity of a general theory of career development? Nadya Fouab, Robert Carter, and others are now seeking data-based answers. How does *theory* need to be adapted, and how do the *methods* need to be adapted to people of different subcultures? (…) I do think the future will help us understand not only *general* career development theory better than we do now, I think it will give us better data and a better understanding of how theory applies to minorities (Freeman, 1993, pp. 262-263).

Vital as it is, career theory will always be engaged in "a struggle for viewpoints," and only "the spirit behind the development of career theory can remain constant" (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 2004, p. 20). The choice of a given classification will be determined by its effectiveness in ordering the multiple career components. As a consequence, the scholarly discourse gravitates toward developing a flexible and adaptive career theory.

Ostensibly, the above theoretical insights into the legacy of career theories imply their inadequacy. This is belied, however, by the postulate to develop an interdisciplinary career theory that will integrate the previously separated levels of analysis. As already stated, the need to fuse micro-theories into a macro-theory offers a chance to develop more comprehensive theoretical frameworks of greater explanatory potential. Thus, career theory keeps evolving in order to sustain of its own relevance in the ever changing reality.

Mark L. Savickas's theory of career construction

In the context of reflection on "theorising," we need to find out what epistemological approach will best help explain a variety of processes that "organise the diversity" of career patterns in contemporary globalised society. In the growth of career theory development, special attention is due to Mark L. Savickas's theory of career construction. Actually the first theory of career development developed in the early 21st century, Savickas's theory updates, expands and integrates of segments of Super's theory of career development. After all, Super's impact cannot be possibly overestimated, both in the development of career research concepts and in revealing the distance career conceptualisations have gone – from matching individual self-concept with the world of work to integrating career with individual life-course. Revising the notions of career development defined in earlier content theories process theories, Savickas's work focuses on vocational personality and career adaptability.[6]

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[6] Drawing on constructionism as a meta-theory, M.L. Savickas also built on outline by Mc Adams (1995) and incorporated three classic segments of career theory: "(1) individual difference in traits, (2) developmental tasks and coping strategies, and (3) psychodynamic motivation" (Patton, McMahon, 2006, p. 162).

Notably, Savickas's views on the individual-vocation fit are consistent with Super's views, but his framework expands and improves the ways of addressing these issues. This is patently manifest in the insistence that individuals differ in terms of their vocational characteristics, aptitudes and personalities, needs, value systems, character traits and self-concepts. Given this, a particular set of personality traits and skills with a certain tolerance margin predisposes any individual to working in a variety of jobs while at the same time many different people may be successful in the same job (Patton, McMahon, 2006, p. 63). What is emphasised in the process of career construction is the work the subject performs on his/herself, his/her permanent engagement in life projects and multidimensional processes as well as acquisition of experience and capacity for self-awareness (Savickas, 2013, p. 148).

Savickas seeks to link and integrate three theoretical traditions: developmental approach, narrative approach and diversification approach, amalgamating them into a theoretical perspective that has come to be referred to the theory of vocational behaviour. It takes into consideration the individual's life structures and "life themes" as well as his/her career adaptability and vocational personality traits (Maree, 2010, pp. 363-364). Thus, Savickas integrates content theory and process theory, insisting that development of career theory is in fact a permanent process of theoretical transformation of the career concept. He emphasises that it is crucial not only to come up with new views of career issues (supporting new ideas) but also to place the existing perspectives "in the perspectives of others" and re-assess them (see Arthur, Hall, Lawrence, 2004, p. 20).

The individual career pattern, identified by Savickas with the attained occupational level and the sequence, frequency and duration of jobs, "is determined by the parents' socioeconomic level and the person's occupation, abilities, personality traits, self-concepts, and career adaptability in transaction with the opportunities presented by society" (Patton, McMahon, 2006, p. 63). Informed by constructivist notions of career development, the theory posits that career lies at the heart of the person's life and is an important factor in individual identity formation. What is more, there is a widespread belief that individuals "own their career"; it is "incorporated" into the individual, so to speak (Savickas, 2013, p. 150).

Essentially, career choice, adaptability and development are viewed as elements of the same, integrated process. Savickas argues that to understand individualised vocational behaviour four core pillars must be taken into account: the individual's life structure, vocational personality,[7] ability of career-adjustment called adaptability and leading life theme. In his theory of career construction, vocational behaviours and their development are comprehended in processual terms, whereby their organisation is seen as holistic, continual and contextual. Instead of being viewed

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[7] Vocational personality can be defined as "a desired set (syndrome, structure) of a person's traits formulated in vocational training [today it would be more fitting to say – in career development; A. C-M], which provides them with active contact with the material and socio-cultural work environment that contributes to their creative pursuits" (Czarnecki, 1973, p. 13).

as a discrete entity, the individual's career development is relationally placed amidst other dimensions or components of the individual's life. Career (which is not a context-less element) is perceived as to life-designing, and, as such, it should be integrated into the individuals' lifestyles (Maree, 2010, p. 363-364). What is more, the subjective sense of a separate self arises with "an emergent awareness that is culturally shaped, socially constituted and linguistically narrated" (Savickas, 2013, p. 148).

Savickas's theory of career construction holds that "individuals actively construct their own reality, and are able to actively construct a meaningful position within the work context" (Patton, McMahon, 2006, p. 63). The structure of the individual's life course, which has been shaped by social processes (society and its institutions), is comprised of the core and secondary roles, with the balance of the core social roles as an essential issue. Homeostasis between the work and family spheres contributes to stability, whereas its lack triggers stressful situations. Personal preferences for life roles (work can be viewed as the core function, but it can also play a secondary role function) are deeply rooted in social practices (Patton, McMahon, 2006, p. 63).

As argued by Savickas, constructing a career essentially involves developing and implementing vocational self-concepts in work roles one adopts and performs. "Self-concepts develop through the interaction of inherited aptitudes (…) to (…) play various roles, and evaluations of the extent to which results of role-playing meet with the approval of peers and supervisors" (Patton, McMahon, 2006, p. 63). Thus, the implementation of self-concepts in a work setting entails a synthesis (reached through role-paying and knowledge from feedback) and compromise between an individual and social factors (Patton, McMahon, 2006, p. 63). In order to explain and interpret career development, without forgetting its individualised character, Savickas seeks to fathom the universal mechanisms and assumptions to consider in studying the quality of individual vocational lives, namely: contextual possibilities, dynamic processes, non-linear character of development, variety of perspectives and individual patterns (Maree, 2010, pp. 363-364). In the unique emphasis on the subject's activity and social constructivism, specified by Hartung and Savickas alike, four dimensions inherent in the development of vocational behaviour are given prominence:

(a) life structure (the *assemblage* of work and other roles that constitute a person's life); (b) career adaptability *strategies* (the coping mechanisms used by individuals to negotiate developmental tasks and environmental changes that accumulate in the course of a lifetime); (c) thematic life *stories* (the motivations and driving forces that pattern lives); and (d) *personality* style (personality traits such as abilities, needs, values, interests and other traits that typify a person's self-concept) (Maree, 2010, p. 363).

In these theoreticians, career design theory and related practice serve as a meta-theory that links and integrates three fundamental theoretical traditions: developmental approach (the subject's individual development), narrative approach (the individual's psychodynamic motivations and leading themes of his/her life stories) and diversity/diversification approach (individual differences, capturing the "difference" vis-à-vis others), producing a theoretical perspective called the theory of vocational behaviour. Viewed cumulatively as an attempt at formulating a meta-theory, theoretical frameworks of vocational behaviour and career development support the validity of studying individual life structures, career adaptability (the way the individual organises his/her life roles and deals with career developmental tasks), life themes (why individuals choose particular career directions) and vocational personality (the individual's characteristic features) (Maree, 2010, pp. 363-364).

Conclusion

The above insights clearly imply that diversification of theoretical approaches to career has contributed to paradigmatic changes. The shift from the traditional to the new paradigms means, in fact, a shift from theories that emphasise and focus on career choices, assessment (by psychometric tools) of the individual's vocational development potential and personality, and defining "who the person is" or "who the person has become" to theories focused on designing careers (with choice processes viewed as repeatable and reversible), self-assessment of personal and environmental possibilities and barriers and inquiry into "who the person is becoming" or "how the person is becoming," as related to the contexts in which the individual is embedded (Bańka, 2007, p. 48). In this sense, the career theory discussed in the foregoing can be said to represent a new view on participation in the reality of global change as it focuses on the nature of the social world (showing the interdependence of the global factors and individual dispositions) and on career, as well as career construction, as a domain of life.[8] Importantly, constructing career theories and career counselling are not seen as logically or pragmatically contradictory. In fact, as stressed by Augustyn Bańka (see Bańka, 2007, p. 60), career counselling is a science focused on the development of micro-theories and a theory-underpinned practice relying on a specific meta-theory.

Translated from Polish by Alicja Jankowiak

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[8] Besides Savickas's theory of career construction, the constructivist school of thought also encompasses: contextual career explanation developed by Young, Valach and Collin (1996), Cochran's narrative approach (1990, 1997), Brown's holistic model of values (1996), Betz's model of self-effectiveness (2001) and Patton and McMahon's systems theory (1999) (see Banai, Harry, 2004, p. 97).

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