

Chapter 2

Designing Projects for Career Construction

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Counseling has the goal of encouraging clients to take actions to improve their lives, and these actions occur both within the counseling session and outside it. The present book, unlike most books on counseling, highlights this action. The editors propose goal-directed action as an integrative conceptualization for counseling practice. They offer action theory as a comprehensive approach that may be used to integrate models of practice that concentrate on narratives, on relationships, or on emotions. The editors also highlight action theory as a general approach that applies to various life domains including career counseling, relationship counseling, crisis counseling, and so forth. In this book, they have organized colleagues and collaborators to discuss how they approach actions from a range of theoretical perspectives. The goal for the chapters is to systematically relate diverse counseling models to the contextual action theory approach.

The present chapter applies the action theory model to counseling for career construction (Savickas 2011). This chapter explains how practitioners view action while conducting career construction counseling. Thus, this chapter concentrates on a single life domain, namely, the theater of work. While action has always been an implicit part of the career construction model, its central role has been underdeveloped both conceptually and practically. So, I welcome the opportunity to closely study contextual action theory, relate it to career construction counseling, and then use it to further elaborate and improve career construction counseling theory. The chapter begins by describing seven perspectives shared by action theory and career construction counseling theory.

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Perspectives Shared by Action Theory and Career Construction Counseling

Action theory (AT) and career construction counseling theory (CT) share in common several critical features. They both emphasize the flow from practice to theory rather than from theory to practice; the fidelity and fluidity of individuals; the epistemology of social constructionism; and the prominent role of identity and adaptability as meta-competencies.

Practice and Theory

AT and CT both begin with practice. Rather than developing a theory and then applying it to practice, AT and CT theorize practice. Counseling practice is always ahead of theory because practitioners must respond to the needs and goals that clients bring to consultation. These issues emerge from their current context, which itself develops faster than theory can account for it. Theory must, in a sense, catch up with the realities that clients bring to counseling. Accordingly, both AT and CT concentrate on the actions of individuals, the context in which the actions occur, and the meaning they give to their actions. Both AT and CT recognize that career development theorists have been preoccupied with confirming the veracity of their models of vocational behavior, without examining how their theories might be applied to assisting individuals in counseling. For many years professors and practitioners mistakenly took theories of career development to be theories of counseling, but they are not (Savickas 2012). Career development theories portray careers yet say little about how to intervene in fostering them. Practitioners need counseling theories that provide them with models for and methods of intervention. Also, models and methods of vocational guidance are just that, they are methods for guiding and advising not counseling. Taking models of vocational guidance to be career counseling models has led to many counselors and professors of counseling eschewing an interest in what has been called career counseling but usually performed as vocational guidance. Both AT and CT concentrate squarely on developing counseling models that theorize effective practices and integrate theories of career development and career counseling.

Individuals as Fixed and Fluid

Young et al. (2011, pp. 88–89) contrast theories that take essentialist and narrativist perspectives on human beings. Essentialists concentrate on the stability of enduring attributes of the self, including personality traits and vocational interests. Narrativists concentrate on the flexibility of the self as fluid through experiences and changing by narrating life-shaping stories. The premise of essentialism or

narrativism taken to its extreme generates difficult problems in conceptualizing counseling practice. AT and CT avoid either extreme in staking out a middle ground that avoids an either/or split position. AT recognizes the long-term persistence of an individual's identity while at the same time acknowledging an ongoing process that constructs and reconstructs identity (Young et al. 2011, p. 90). CT endorses both the fidelity and flexibility of individuals in viewing the steadfastness of self-as-actor in maintaining a persona and reputation and viewing the flexibility of self-as-author in responding to new contexts.

Social Constructionist Epistemology

Both AT and CT apply a social constructionist epistemology in asserting that people construct their own lives and careers through action. Both models attend to the social nature of construction by viewing it as “joint action” or “co-construction”. Actions that construct selves are viewed as performing narratives that are rife with intentionality, meaning-making, and mattering. Narrative is about who you are, action is about performing you on a social stage. Through action in the theater of work, an individual becomes the story that they constructed during career counseling.

Meta-Competencies

It appears that AT and CT agree that the actions which construct the self and the life are informed and shaped by two meta-competencies. The term meta-competence refers to the general ability to learn and apply more specific competencies or skills within a domain. Hall and Chandler (2004, p. 9) described two meta-competencies that foster navigating transitions, namely identity and adaptability. Relying on self-knowledge and knowing when and how to make career changes fosters the smoothness of transitions. For AT, the meta-competencies that direct action involve identity and goal-directed process (Young et al. 2011, p. 17). CT also highlights two meta-competencies in terms of the self-as-author's identity and the self-as-agent's adaptability. In career construction theory, identity involves an understanding of self in relation to social roles and environmental contexts while adaptability involves the readiness and resources needed to cope with developmental tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas in these social roles and environmental contexts.

Motivation

Both AT and CT view humans as being in action. CT fully accepts George Kelly's (1955) premise that human beings are a form of motion. To be alive is to move; to

be human is to act. This premise means that neither CT nor AT need to focus on the issue of motivation as fueling or energizing behavior because people are always in movement. Instead of concentrating on motivation—or how to make people move—these two theories concentrate attention on individuals' direction and style of movement. CT sees the direction of movement as toward equilibrium with the environment. When a current adaptation or *punctuated equilibrium* is upset, individuals move to restore equilibrium or stasis, either at the previous level or at a higher level that is simultaneously more stable and flexible.

Adaptation Projects

Furthermore, CT agrees completely with AT that counseling is a goal-directed project. While the goals for AT pertain to most life domains and adjustment issues, the goals for CT deal with making a transition in a work role. Young et al. (2011) defined transitions as goal-directed actions that are most readily understood as a project. From this astute perspective, career counseling clients seek assistance in their projects of adapting to a work-role transition. The goal of CT is to assist clients in making transitions. Young et al. (2011) point out that counseling itself is also a project. For CT, the project of counseling is constructing the client's adaptation project and encouraging actions to complete a transition.

Action/Project/Career or Actor/Agent/Author

Both AT and CT view action as behavior infused with meaning. CT views action across a panorama of actor, agent, and author. Initially, it surveys the person engaging in the action, that is, the actor. The actor portrays some character in each action episode. This character may be viewed subjectively as a self-concept and objectively as a persona with a reputation. As children develop their characters they slowly become agents in their own lives. As agents they direct their action in striving for goals, which eventually become hierarchically arranged projects. As emerging adults, individuals begin to author a life story. This narrative identity conveys what is meaningful to them across projects. The binding power of narrative continuity and coherence transforms the sequence of projects into a consequential career. So the panorama of CT views action as involving the behavior of the actor, striving of the agent, and explanation of the author.

The CT language of actor, agent, and author relates directly to the AT language of action, project, and career. The actor is about goal-directed action in the short-term; the agent is about projects that link actions across a mid-term; and the author is about career and the long-term meanings of action projects. AT focuses attention squarely on agency and clients as agents in their own lives. CT views agency as "adaptability," one of the two meta-competencies for constructing a career. Because

AT shares more with CT's view of the agent than with its views of the actor or author, the remainder of this chapter will examine the relationships between AT's innovative conception of career counseling as a transition project and CT's conception of counseling to increase agency and adaptation.

This topic merits attention because, in sum, AT and CT both emphasize that practice precedes and informs theory, individuals are both steadfast and flexible, individuals co-construct their selves and identities using the cultural resources provided to them, the meta-competencies of identity and adaptability can play a prominent role in steering and informing goal-directed action to bridge transitions, human beings move so motivation is about steering behavior, and career counseling is a transitive project. The next section describes how AT can inform CT, in particular elaborating CT's views on career counseling as a project that seeks to increase clients' agency and adaptation as they transit from school-to-work, occupation-to-occupation, and job-to-job. This inquiry begins with examining how AT and CT, despite sharing many perspectives, rest on different premises about counseling as a project.

Premises of Career Construction Counseling

AT and CT differ in how they conceptualize the transition project and how to approach it in counseling. Young et al. (2011) prefer to view transition projects as not predetermined. They recommend approaching transition projects as the client sees them and then jointly constructing the projects with the appropriate goal-directed action. While it is difficult to disagree with this view, CT prefers viewing transition projects through the lens of socially constructed expectations or developmental tasks. The tasks that compose the transition project, and conceptualized by the individual are in a broader sense predetermined by society's grand narrative of career. Young et al. (2011, p. 16) accurately see the developmentalist view of CT as proposing what is necessary for a successful transition. They prefer instead to look at what is actually happening in the actions of the transition and how a person conceptualizes and organizes these actions.

As an example of the difference in AT and CT premises, let us consider a case that involves a mother helping her daughter apply to college (Young et al. 2011, p. 14). Taking a psychosocial view, CT conceptualizes this action as implementing a choice, hopefully based on crystallized preferences and a specific decision. Young and colleagues prefer not to view this as a developmental task but rather focus on the intentions of the person involved. They encourage counselors to appreciate how the person involved views the action, that is, what they see the behaviors as being about. It seems that AT focuses on the current actions and the intentionality that informs it, while CT includes the antecedents and consequences that shape the present behavior. Of course, there is overlap, yet the differences lead CT to a different view of counseling as a project.

Transition Tasks as Habitus

Young et al. (2011) state that there may be substantial overlap in how a person conceptualizes actions and what is expected culturally and chronologically. Possibly, AT would accept the construct of *habitus* to explain the overlap. The French sociologist Bourdieu (1977) introduced the construct of *habitus* describing it as an internalization of social structures that inhabit the mind as acquired mental schemata and expectations. Developmental tasks seem to function as a *habitus* in supplying individuals with meanings they can use to interpret their transitions and careers. Developmental tasks represent an interpenetration of objective divisions of the social world and an individual's subjective vision of them, causing a correspondence and interplay between an individual's mental structures and a community's social structures (Guichard and Cassar 1998). They offer an account that people use to understand themselves and others. On the one hand, developmental tasks enable individuals to think about and take stock of their transitions and adaptation by using social schemata provided by society. On the other hand, developmental tasks enable other people including counselors to comprehend an individual's personal experience and private meaning by embedding it in and systematically organizing it according to a dominant social structure. In addition to providing a commonsense framework, developmental tasks synchronize individuals to their culture by telling them in advance how their transitions should proceed. Individuals enact their unique version of these transition scripts in a particular historical era, given location, and specific opportunity structure that discriminates by race, age, sex, religion, and class. As a social script for progressing through an orderly sequence of predictable tasks in a cycle of adaptation, developmental tasks give hope and security to many people. Nevertheless, there are other people whose experience does not fit the story. Instead of progressing in transit to new adaptation, some people encounter barriers that force them to regress, drift, flounder, stagnate, or stop.

Adaptation Tasks

The CT views the project of transition from the perspective of a pre-determined script of effective responses for making an adaptation. Simply stated, the outline of *adaptive actions* includes orientation, exploration, stabilization, maintenance, and disengagement. The script can be applied to the example of applying to a college. The CT examines the adaptive process beginning with the need to orient oneself to the project of attending college. It quickly moves to the exploration of potential colleges to attend based on self and circumstances. This exploration eventually leads to a commitment to a particular college or small group of colleges and the task of applying to them. Having secured a position at a college, the individual stabilizes that choice by enrolling in the college, then mastering its requirements and maintain progress through the curriculum, and eventually disengaging from that punctuated adaptation by graduating. However before graduation, the individual must initiate

a new project involving the school-to work-transition. Similarly to AT, CT would attend to how the individual views the task of college application, but would view the client's meaning-making and actions through a social lens of expectations about its place in a sequence of adaptation.

The counselor would use the adaptation script as a *habitus* to understand the individual's narrative about the college application and the transition project. This is where the counselor's expertise enters the picture. Counselors bring their own expert knowledge and professional skill to the collaboration. Counselors are experts in how to help individuals grow in self-knowledge and develop as a person during transitions. While clients know themselves and are experts on their own lives, counselors know about transitions. Together through co-construction of transitive narratives and joint action, client and counselor may approach the transition project by merging the client's knowledge of content with the counselor's knowledge of process. Of course, counselors realize that there are limits to client self-knowledge. CT acknowledges that some clients are strangers in their own lives; they may even use denial and keep secrets to hinder adaptation to a transition. To know their lives and learn how to make transitions is why many clients seek counseling.

Although AT and CT may approach the action project of transition using slightly different premises, they share the same fundamental counseling goal. Action is about moving toward goals. In the language of AT, the goal of counseling is to increase client agency or acting power by establishing goals and ways to achieve them (Young et al. 2011, p. 25). In the language of CT, the goals of career counseling are to increase client "adaptability, narratability, and activity" (Savickas et al. 2009, p. 245). Counselors use these superordinate goals to steer or guide what happens during counseling. But first, the counselor has to form a working alliance in which to establish these goals and have a client commit to engage in the processes that move toward these goals. According to AT, the counselor steers toward the goal of what is useful to the client, controls the session by identifying steps needed to reach goals, and regulates the session by responding to affect and meaning-making processes. CT has a highly developed structure for steering joint action, identifying steps in the counseling project, and regulating the session. The processes of steering, remaining on task, and regulating sessions have been explained thoroughly elsewhere (Savickas 2011). Less attention has been paid to inducting clients in career counseling by co-constructing what is to ensue as a project for joint action. Until now, CT has not fully elaborated how to induct clients into counseling at the beginning of a consultation. Taking AT's perspective, this induction may be viewed as project management.

Defining Counseling Goals and Designing the Transition Project

AT characterizes counseling with three phases or functional steps (Young et al. 2011, p. 188). After establishing a working alliance, the first phase involves identifying pertinent ongoing projects and then orienting client to the goals and processes

of counseling through exploration of their presenting concerns. The second phase involves working on projects and monitoring client progress. The third and final phase involves reviewing changes that have been made and discussing how to stabilize these accomplishments. As noted earlier, CT has well-articulated procedures for what AT calls phases two and three. CT could advance by attending more thoroughly to what AT calls phase one, identifying projects. To do so in this chapter, I apply to CT the metaphor of *project management* from the business world. In industry and in CT, a project denotes a temporary endeavor with a clear beginning and end undertaken to meet unique goals and objectives (Nokes 2007). Project management begins with carefully planning and methodically organizing what will occur during counseling to achieve those specific goals. CT practitioners do this careful planning and methodical organizing by following a routine with eight elements to be described in turn: goals, projects, trajectory, context, emotions, readiness, resources, and audience.

Working Alliance and Counseling Goals

The initiation of the client–counselor relationship is, of course, a critical step because as counseling begins, so it goes. The counselor must consciously and conscientiously establish a working alliance. The two words of *working* and *alliance* are each important. Alliance means a relationship based on trust, empathy, and encouragement. Working means moving toward some goal or outcome. Without a clear vision of a joint goal, it is difficult to firmly establish a working alliance, much less take coordinated action that works. CT tries to make this clear to clients from its opening inquiry. After greeting a client, and maybe some small talk, the counselor asks a critical question.

Counselors begin the professional relationship by asking a client how counseling may be useful to her or him. This question about goals is asked in more than one way to ensure that the working alliance begins with a joint goal. A second way that counselors ask about clients' goals is to inquire what they would like to accomplish by the end of that session and by the end of counseling. In posing this question in two or more ways, counselors signal to clients that the ensuing interaction is a collaboration, one consisting of joint goal-directed actions that address the project under construction. The inquiry is intended to suggest to clients that they take the lead in doing the work on the project. This suggestion is important because a main predictor of successful counseling outcomes is that the client works harder than the counselor. If counselors do most of the work, as they sometimes do in performing vocational guidance and test interpretation, then their clients advance only minimally in constructing their projects.

Counselors listen closely to how a client describes a goal for counseling because that goal may already be implicitly achieved in the way she or he speaks about the goal. For many clients, what they seek from CT is already present in the shadows of their imagination. For example, I recently counseled with a 45-year-old female

social worker. She sought counseling just to learn about her herself. I told her that we could do that yet she would be better served by a more specific goal. In reply, she wanted to consider a job change because she wanted to be more of an advocate than a cog in the machine. Of course what developed through counseling was clarifying her story and gathering momentum to do just that. She was frustrated by how clients were treated by a bureaucratic system and wanted to sit outside the bureaucracy as an advocate for those who were ignored or mistreated by the system. Implicitly, she knew the transition that she wanted to pursue and her project for counseling. Counseling only helped her acknowledge what she already knew.

As a second example, consider the client who said “I want to find out why I get depressed when I enter the science building.” The answer is obvious to the reader; the client did not want to be in the science building. The implicit goal of counseling for the client was to find a way to stay out of the science building. However as Einstein was reported to once observe, the thinking that gets us into a problem is the not type of thinking that will get us out of the problem. In CT, counselors believe that the story that got this student into the science building will not allow him to stay out of the building. Depression is just a temporary way of avoiding the building. He needs a new story and that became the counseling project. Also reverberating in the shadows is a story of life outside the science building. According to Abraham Lincoln’s maxim, “A goal properly set is halfway achieved” (Ziglar 1997, p. 37). Thus, practitioners begin counseling by learning what a client wishes to accomplish through the consultation.

Client’s Project

As clients respond to this agenda setting inquiry, counselors listen for the project that clients will have to complete to reach their stated goals. CT counselors anticipate that the goal-directed project that most clients bring to counseling involves adapting to some change in circumstances or self. In working with high school and college students, the counselor typically listens for the *developmental task* that confronts the client in the form of a social expectations based on chronological age. Developmental tasks and customary transitions such as graduating from a training program, may be anticipated. Developmental tasks are usually viewed as positive changes or advances, despite the challenges involved. In comparison to students, employed adults seek counseling to cope with unexpected and unwanted changes such as the sudden loss of a job. Some clients seek career counseling because they need to cope with a work trauma such as an occupational injury that needs rehabilitation or harassment or bullying that need ending. Whether perceived as positive or negative, the changes prompted by tasks, transitions, and traumas may acutely disorient individuals from their accustomed view of the work and their place in it and thereby produce confusion and conflict. Occasionally, adults seek career counseling with a project prompted by yearning for a personal transformation in the form of a new challenge or change of scenery. The CT uses the generic term *adaptation*

project to refer to the group of tasks, transitions, traumas, and transformations. In short, after first understanding clients' goals for counseling then practitioners identify the type of project to be undertaken, whether it is coping with a developmental task, occupational change, work trauma, or personal transformation.

Adaptation Cycle

Adaptation projects have been characterized with predictable trajectories called a transition cycle (Nicholson 1990), learning cycle (Hall), and adaptation mini-cycle (Savickas 2005). Nicholson (1990) proposed a transition cycle as a framework for analyzing work-role changes. A transition cycle begins with preparation to enter a new work role. During the period called encounter, the individual enters the role and tries to make sense of it. This sense-making and socialization leads to a period of adjustment during which the individual embeds self in the organizational culture and role. During a long stabilization period, the individual concentrates on performing the role and maintaining coworker relationships. Sooner or later, whether induced by the organization or the individual, preparation for a new role begins. This almost inevitable new preparation occurs because 70% of jobs started by workers in their 30s end in 5 or less years. One in four workers has been with their current employer for less than a year (Mullins 2009).

Hall (2002) has explained that because of the dejobbing occasioned by the digital revolution, work environments now longer can be characterized with Super's (1952) description of a single life-long career cycle with a series of stages. The traditional "career" has been replaced with a sequence of shorter learning cycles. Each career learning cycle has periods of exploration, trial, establishment, and mastery. Eventually, the individual will need to begin a new learning cycle starting with exploration because the current position has been reshaped by n technology, the economy, or personal factors.

The CT also proposes that career adaptation as a project follows a predictable cycle of activities each named for their principal function: orientation, exploration, stabilization, management, and disengagement. The sequence portrays the adaptation min-cycle, with each period calling for a different type of goal-directed actions. After becoming oriented toward and familiar with the adaptive demand, individuals may explore its requirements, risks, and rewards as they search for social opportunities and consider possible selves. Ideally, exploration progresses from broad to narrow to advanced. Broad exploration finds information that allows crystallization of tentative preferences. Narrow exploration gathers relevant information for making a decision from among the preferred alternatives. Eventually, implementation of that decision by trying on the choice in the form of an apprenticeship or job allows advanced exploration of person-position fit. After a period of trial or trials, individuals stabilize in a position by making a commitment projected forward for a certain period of time. As they perform the position requirements, they consolidate their new equilibrium and maybe refine it. This may or may not be followed

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