Editorial

Negotiating 21st century challenges in career counselling at South African institutions of higher education: Can this be done and, if so, how?

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INTRODUCTION

The third issue of the SAJHE for 2009 deals with the challenges facing career counselling at South African institutions of higher education in the 21st century. The interested reader will encounter an absorbing compilation of national, international, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary contributions. Individually, these contributions represent the fruits of months, if not years, of dedication and application in different research contexts. Collectively, they provide an imposing collage of perspectives on 21st century career counselling. Crafting their distinctive contributions with enthusiasm and sensitivity, and locating themselves in a predominantly qualitative research tradition, the authors have produced a set of discussions (and follow-up discussions) that help us understand and appreciate postmodern career counselling at South African institutions of higher education. The authors focus on a number of pressing contemporary research developments in the field that span the spectrum of psychological investigation.

BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUE

Universities across South Africa have repeatedly expressed their concern about the academic quality of the students produced by the schooling system. Seen against the release of the results of the country's first outcomes-based national Grade 12 examination and the numerous debates that ensued on questions such as those listed below, the contributions in this issue will provide much food for thought for psychologists locally and further afield:

- How will these learners perform at tertiary level?
- Is it still the (largely black) rural and township sector that is being disadvantaged by the lack of career counselling, and in what ways does this lack of career counselling impact on learners' achievements at tertiary level?
- How does lack of career counselling impact on (un-)employment levels?
- What is the longer term outlook for career counselling at South African institutions of higher education in the 21st century?

Career counselling as a profession has in recent years seen numerous changes globally. Changes in people's lifestyles caused by technological advances and the information explosion have brought fresh challenges to career counselling. New careers requiring new skills and attitudes are constantly emerging, and career counselling has to keep abreast of these developments if it is to remain relevant to postmodern society (Savickas 1995; 2006; 2007; Watson 2004).

Locally, calls have been made for changes in the profession. The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (Department of Education 2001, 4) contains an agenda for the role of education in the reconstruction and development programme. The NPHE stresses the importance of 'human resource development: the mobilisation of human talent and potential through lifelong learning' (Department of Education 2001, 3). It highlights the 'chronic mismatch between the output of Higher Education and the needs of a modernising economy', emphasising the 'shortage of highly trained graduates in fields such as science, engineering, technology and commerce [which] has been detrimental to social and economic development' (Department of Education 2001, 3), and it stresses the need for career-oriented training.

Yet, 15 years into South Africa's democracy, a lack of vision and of a unified career counselling strategy is evident in the country; indeed, the career counselling profession seems to be at a crossroads. Why this bold statement?

Firstly, career opportunities in South Africa are not fairly distributed. South African career patterns remain skewed in favour of previously privileged groups, and the majority of black persons are still not receiving adequate career counselling. Career counselling in South Africa remains available only to those who can afford this (often expensive) service. The acclaimed Cosser Report says the following in this regard.

> Career guidance in whatever form ... has a positive effect on intention to enter [Higher Education] HE. (Cosser 2002, 93)

Secondly, although career theory, practice and assessment globally have been accused of failing to address the needs of non-white, non-Western, non-'standard' populations (McMahon and Patton 2002), transformation and diversity remain largely abstract concepts divorced from the real-life situation in South Africa. Staff attached to psychology departments at historically white institutions remain predominantly

white, and the Board of Psychology's ideal of an 80 : 20 (black : white) student distribution in postgraduate courses remains a distant mirage.

Thirdly, while a shift is taking place globally towards acceptance of qualitative approaches to career counselling, South African institutions of higher education still cling to the traditional, positivist model. In South Africa in 2009, very few tertiary training institutions have embraced this exciting development. Career counselling in South Africa is still characterised by psychometric assessment procedures – by what Stead and Watson (1998) call 'proven' assessment methods. Career counsellors should be looking for an approach that 'enables rather than fits' (Savickas 1993; 2004, 211).

That said, many colleagues have criticised Eurocentric career counselling models and have called for research into an approach that would more satisfactorily take a developing (African) country perspective into account. Is this a viable idea whose time has come? Can models developed in North America be adapted and put into practice in such a way as to impact positively and significantly on the current state of career counselling in South Africa? Or should we do our own research and develop models that are better suited for career counselling in institutions of higher education in developing countries? More pertinently, can we achieve this aim? These are exactly the type of issues that have inspired this guest issue and I sincerely hope our collective contribution will provide some useful ideas in this regard.

WHAT READERS CAN EXPECT IN THIS ISSUE

The contributors to this specific guest issue have individually and collectively succeeded in identifying hiatuses in the literature and in addressing these hiatuses. As the *SAJHE* prides itself on being a channel of critical inquiry rather than advocacy writing, I am particularly pleased with these critical voices and trust that they will stimulate debate on the important topics covered here. Readers should therefore not expect clear-cut, uniform 'answers' to all the questions raised. On the contrary, they should make up their own minds on the various issues. After all, the contributions stem from the authors' own perspectives, which are, of necessity, bound in a unique location, time and space.

The importance of 'adaptability' in the ever-changing world of work is receiving a lot of attention globally, and a number of authors have directly and indirectly touched on this subject. In our second contribution, *Unity and relevance: envisioning career counselling's future in higher education*, Paul J. Hartung argues that, for institutions of higher education to modify their practices to meet the needs of a diverse student population, career counsellors will have to adapt career development paradigms to assist people to navigate the complexities of the continuously changing world of work. Hartung proposes four strategies that collectively offer a framework for career counselling's future: empowering workers to adapt, modernising the foundations of career counselling in respect of individual differences and development, renewing awareness of social class and culture, and reconciling positivist and constructivist

(qualitative and quantitative) perspectives on career counselling in order to place work and career concerns in the contexts of people's developing life stories. This is, *par excellence*, a framework that demands the attention of all stakeholders in career counselling at tertiary institutions as their sustained input is needed to achieve unity and relevance in the discipline.

In the third contribution, Mark Watson and Mary McMahon consider, on the basis of the systems theory framework of career development, the multi-layered national and international context in which the challenges facing career counselling are primarily located. The authors use the case study of a black South African student to exemplify the application of a qualitative career assessment approach in South African institutions of higher education in the 21st century.

Regrettably, even in 2009, South African institutions of higher education have still not fully addressed inequities in enrolments and in the distribution of persons from previously disenfranchised populations across the employment spectrum. In his article, *Career counselling with secondary school-aged youth: directions for theory, research, and practice*, Justin C. Perry provides guidelines for theory, research and practice in respect of secondary school-aged youth from a psychology of working perspective. He looks at higher education as a key institutional partner with programmes based inside and outside the school and explains the roles of self-determination theory, critical consciousness and social support as synergistic mechanisms for fostering school engagement and preventing school dropout.

In a related contribution, *Adolescents' perceived career challenges and needs in a disadvantaged context in South Africa from a social cognitive career theoretical perspective*, Thabile Buthelezi, Daleen Alexander and Joseph Seabi employ social cognitive career theory (SCCT) to understand disadvantaged adolescents' perceived career challenges and needs. Their study reveals a strong reciprocal relationship between adolescents' social environment, their cognitive processes (including self-efficacy beliefs) and their career development. As elitism, racism and inequality still permeate South Africa's counselling fraternity, all stakeholders in higher education should apply their minds to the issues raised in the article in order to promote fully democratic participation in counselling.

Counsellors in the past accepted as fact that 'matching' and 'objective' likenesses were objectively real and true. The aura of scientific authority that surrounded the questionnaire format in an excessively empirically inclined culture made it easy to label and categorise a client in a way that may have been severely damaging to that client's best interests. In their contribution, *Good hope in chaos: beyond matching to complexity in career development*, Robert Pryor and Jim Bright present the chaos theory of careers (CTC) as an alternative theoretical perspective to the matching paradigm; one that incorporates both stability and change on the basis of convergent and emergent approaches.

In South Africa today, institutions of higher education need to answer the following career counselling questions: 'How would [our] approach be useful to a man who has been sentenced to spend the rest of his days in prison; or someone who

consumes a bottle of gin a day and lives on the streets; or a gang member in an urban ghetto; or a single mother with four children living in abject poverty?' (Winslade 2007, 52). An approach is required that (a) facilitates understanding of individual and collective strengths and barriers in career development; (b) assists students to utilise strengths and negotiate barriers in order to succeed with tertiary studies; (c) enhances assessment (and employment) opportunities for students; (d) helps students negotiate major life transitions; (e) assists students in taking their first steps in career pathing; (f) administers (viable, affordable) career counselling to all students; and (g) links life stories and career choices. Sonja Coetzee, Liesel Ebersöhn and Ronél Ferreira's article, *An asset-based approach in career facilitation: lessons for higher education training*, ties in neatly with the ideas of Pryor and Bright. Their analysis reveals two main themes, namely the significance of personality traits, age, family dynamics, career interest profiles and previous career assessment experiences when using asset-based strategies on the one hand; and the challenging role of the asset-based career facilitator on the other. It also confirms that in traditional career guidance paradigms, client-partners expected the career facilitator to function as the (sole) expert, which meant that the client-partners shied away from the shared responsibility of partnership. The authors then identify indicators and contra-indicators for using asset-based career facilitation.

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) recently commissioned a review of career development in South Africa to clarify what SAQA's role might be in assisting learners to navigate their way through the maze of education, training and work opportunities. In their contribution, *Navigating the National Qualifications Framework (NQF): the role of career guidance*, Shirley Walters, Anthony Watts and Patricia Flederman locate this review historically and in relation to policy developments internationally. The authors call for a high-level national career development initiative in South Africa to act as a catalyst for career development services across all education, training and work sectors, both public and private, based on a lifelong learning philosophy and approach.

Most of our contributors spell out the advantages of merging different approaches, for example those proposed by Hartung (2007) and Savickas (2006). Against this background, Jacqueline Akhurst and Martin Liebenberg, in their article *Analysing career counselling in a South African setting: Exploring the utility of a model from activity theory*, integrate previous research findings and theory to show the limitations of traditional career counselling for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They highlight the challenges faced by students in adjusting to the university environment, and they propose a constructivist approach as more appropriate for career counsellors.

The penultimate contribution, *Career counselling an African immigrant student in a USA school setting: Merging transition theory with a narrative approach*, by Matthew Mims, Grace Mims and Lisa A. Newland, dovetails with the previous contribution. The authors confirm the emergence of voices calling for a critical examination of conventional career theory and of innovative, postmodern approaches that capture the complex, unique and evolving needs of diverse and disadvantaged

students. The authors use a narrative case study to evaluate and describe the application of Schlossberg's transitional theory to the career development of an African immigrant high school student in the United States.

Career counsellors across the globe confirm that Grade 12 learners are increasingly asking whether it is advisable to take a gap year or to continue with their tertiary studies immediately after high school. In their contribution, *The possible value of a gap year: A case study*, Melinda Coetzee and Suzanne Bester explore the experiences of three young people who took a gap year and the influence it had on their individual career decision-making process. The authors conclude that the main value of the gap year is the personal growth it facilitates and the extra time it affords young people before they decide on their future careers.

We hope that in this issue we have succeeded in promoting an understanding of the continuing inequitable relationships in career counselling and in providing guidelines for overcoming current problems in the profession. We also hope that we have stimulated debate on career counselling in institutions of higher education in South Africa and that, in so doing, we have helped expand the network of academics in South Africa, in the SADC region and in the rest of the world.

Lastly: I realise that reviewing manuscripts is a selfless task undertaken by those who have the interests of colleagues, the journal and the scholarly community at large at heart. I accordingly extend a sincere word of thanks to everyone who reviewed articles for this special issue of *SAJHE*. Your support is greatly appreciated.

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