

# Brief Overview of the Advancement of Postmodern<sup>1</sup> Approaches to Career Counseling

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Global changes in people's lifestyles and in the world of work (prompted by changes in the global economy) have necessitated changes in the facilitation of career counseling in the postmodern era. This article attempts to provide a concise overview of the advancement of postmodern approaches in career counseling. First, it critically evaluates the influence of changes in the workplace on people's lifestyles. Subsequently it elucidates the influence of the different waves in psychology and the economy on helping models in career counseling, and the way in which these waves have shaped the theory and practice of career counseling. This is followed by an illumination of the paradigm shift in career counseling from a predominantly quantitative (positivist) approach to an acknowledgement of the value of qualitative approaches and the development of a combined qualitative-quantitative approach. Lastly, the article explicates the fairly recent emergence of constructivist approaches (concurrently with the emergence of life designing) and career adaptability as a core aim of career counseling.

*Keywords:* postmodern, career counseling, career construction, life designing, economic waves, waves in counseling, qualitative assessment

Society is attempting to respond to the glacier effects of the ever-evolving fourth wave in the economy (Maree & Pollard, 2009). The latter is accompanied by rapid changes in society, communities, the workplace, work content, technology, perceptions of work, values, as well as goals and meanings attached to work. The world of work has changed so rapidly over the past few years that yet another major paradigm shift was necessitated in career counseling in terms of theory, as well as practice. Where in the past the practice of career counseling was based on a predominantly (if not exclusively) quantitative ('test-and-tell' or 'person-environment fit') approach, a gradual shift has occurred over time. Over the past few decades, qualitative approaches based on the elicitation of life stories and personal narratives in particular, have emerged strongly. The consensus now is that a combined qualitative-quantitative approach, based on a deep sense of respect for clients, a strong emphasis on the meaning clients need to find in their lives, and their personal stories, equips practitioners with a possible means to address the shortcomings that characterized the profession in the past, and is useful to clients as they design their lives.

## Goals of the Review

This article provides a brief overview of the advancement of postmodern approaches to career counseling and seeks to answer the following questions:

- a. In which ways have the different waves in psychology and the economy influenced helping models in career counseling and prompted paradigm shifts in both the theoretical approach to and the practical way in which career counseling is administered?
- b. What are the major changes that characterize the paradigm shift from a predominantly quantitative (positivist) approach to an acknowledgement of the value of qualitative approaches?

- c. What is the link between constructivist approaches and life designing (including career adaptability) as the primary aim of career counseling?

**Rationale for post-modern approaches.** The rationale for the emergence of a fresh paradigmatic approach in career counseling over the past two decades or so is self-evident. Schultheiss and Van Esbroeck (2009, p. 1) contend that despite changes brought about in the profession, career counseling is at a crossroads and the "longevity and viability of current theories, practices, training and research" are increasingly being challenged. It has become progressively difficult to 'predict' the future and to determine the factors that will co-determine career and life success. Gone are the days of a traditional and predictable movement from school to a work environment and then to retirement (Peavy, as cited in Campbell & Ungar, 2004). There is a growing realization that so-called 'objective' tests do not fully and accurately measure interests, personalities and values, and that change occurs over time, resulting in initial career choices for young adults (and others) being unsatisfactory later in life (Borchard, 1995). Furthermore, we are currently in the midst of the most transformative moment in economic history (Savickas, 2006a), and individuals are gradually being forced to accept responsibility for their lives: the 'stable' post-industrial world of work no longer exists, and security and stability in the workplace are no longer guaranteed (Maree, 2002). The impact that changes in clients' lifestyles have on career counseling theory and practice is discussed next.

## Impact of Global Changes in the Workplace on People's Lifestyles

Radical changes in people's lifestyle and career planning, arising from the phenomenal technological advancement and the information explosion of the 21st century, have brought career counseling theory and practice to a crossroads. People

rarely remain in one job for their lifetime nowadays (Savickas, 2006a; Watts, 2008). New careers requiring new skills and attitudes are constantly emerging, and career counseling has to keep abreast of these developments if it is to remain effective and relevant in postmodern society (Savickas, 2006a; Watson, 2004). Naicker (1994) claims that people in the major developed economies change careers an average of five times during their career lifetime. Savickas (2006b) asserts that individuals in the United States of America born between 1957 and 1964 had an average of ten jobs from the age of 18 to 38. While these figures cannot summarily be applied to all contexts, the general trend globally is for employees to migrate between jobs more regularly. Short-term assignments, rather than appointment in one job in one firm on a permanent basis are becoming far more common. Also, there is an urgent need to examine the growing gap between what is currently offered in training and the skills needed to execute a job successfully.

The idea of a small core of permanent employees, a sizeable group of practitioners whose particular and sought-after skills are bought, and a large number of temporary workers was predicted to become commonplace by year 2000 (Handy in Hughes, 1997). However, to keep abreast of technological changes, employees have to become lifelong learners, receive ongoing training, acquire the skill to adapt to rapidly changing career contexts, and deal with repeated transitions. Hence they have to acquire cutting-edge skills associated with the latest technology to remain relevant in a highly competitive job market. The realities of the 21st century labor market should therefore dictate assessment strategies and guide feedback to clients. Multi-skilling, for instance, is crucial. Clients should be encouraged to become critical thinkers, creative problem solvers and skilled decision makers in order to become employable, instead of merely be trained linearly for one specific job. To enable clients to 'make meaning' in their lives, create holding environments and become more whole, career counselors play an increasingly important integrating role in the effective facilitation of careers in situations that constantly require new skills and increasingly compel employees to use their work to become more whole. Career counselors therefore have little choice but to become au fait with the impact of different helping models that have informed career counseling at different stages, and influenced by changes in the global economy. More important to the practice of counseling in the post-modern world is the link between the transformative movements or waves (as previously discussed). I briefly elucidate on of these aspects next.

### **Overview of the Interplay between Waves in Psychology, Economy and, Career Counseling over the Past 120 Years**

Given the huge impact of changes in the global economy on helping models in career counseling, it seems important to discuss this matter first. In each case I cite key references by sub-heading for readers who may want to do additional study on the specific aspects.

**Connection between helping models in career counseling and economic waves (Molitor, 1999, 2000; Savickas, 2006a, 2006b, 2007b).** The first helping model (ca 1850-1910) was referred to as Friendly Volunteers (Savickas, 2006a; 2007b). In this era (agricultural era: first economic wave), workers grew up on farms and by and large knew what they wanted to do. Those who wanted to leave the farms had access to guidance from a self-styled 'friendly visitor'. Vocational guidance (the second helping model) occurred only during the second economic wave (industrial era: ca 1900-1950), when a myriad

of jobs became available and people started flocking to the cities. After World War II, during the third economic wave, with the establishment of large international corporations characterized by bureaucratic hierarchies (service era: ca 1940-1990), career counseling (the third helping model) emerged. Career counselors advised individuals on how to choose an occupation and subsequently develop a career in it by climbing the traditional corporate ladder (Savickas, 2006b). Since the 1990s, with the emergence of the knowledge economy and computer technology (the fourth economic wave or information era: 1990-current), growing uncertainty among workers about the permanency of their occupations gave rise to career construction for life designing (the fourth helping model) with its strong emphasis on empowering persons to 'make meaning', write their own life stories and construct their own careers and futures instead of 'choosing'.

In order to understand why career construction in particular emerged so strongly over approximately two decades as a theoretical base for career counseling, it is important to understand the traits or qualities that drove the career counseling profession in during each of the four waves discussed above. I will therefore touch on this issue briefly now.

**Traits emphasized during each of the four economic waves and concurrent helping models in career counseling (Savickas, 2006a, 2006, 2007b).** The first economic wave occurred in a 19th century romantic atmosphere. Career was seen as a vocation; character was valued highly (e.g., self-sufficiency, humility and frugality) and was expressed through self-expression and individual effort (craftspeople and farmers were the 'workers'; family traditions were honored) (Savickas, 1993). People were expected to 'be the same' and to have the same values. The second economic wave was characterized by empire builders who organized craftspeople into companies and built large cities. Concurrent with the development of science and the emphasis on an objective approach to pure sciences, career counselors developed 'objective' assessment instruments to assess personality, including interests. Career counseling favored an objective (positivist) perspective. Parsons asserts that whereas scientists objectified the world, counselors objectified interests, values and abilities by using inventories and tests. During the third economic wave, logical positivism started giving way to subjective perspectives (Savickas, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006b), and meaning making began to emerge. In the fourth economic wave, identity rather than personality and vocational personality types is fore-grounded, and the tendency is to help people make sense of their lives, which provides the rationale for identity. According to Savickas (2008) a stable identity includes knowing one's story, having a clear and stable picture of oneself, and understanding the world of work. The increased emphasis on identity coincides with a decreased emphasis on the concept of maturity or climbing the developmental ladder, and a focus on career adaptability and lifelong learning.

Because the prevailing psychological, political, social and economic cultures in which any counseling practice evolves have a significant impact on the advance of career counseling epistemology (theory of knowledge) and practice, I will now elaborate on the advancement of epistemological approaches that have underpinned and guided career counseling over the past 120 years.

### Epistemological Approaches that have Underpinned and Guided the Practice of Career Counseling over the Past 120 Years

The underlying paradigm in career counseling shifts once in every approximately 50 years, inevitably influencing the actual practice of career counseling (Savickas, 2006b). To elucidate this aspect I will begin this section by referring briefly to the traditional approach.

**The traditional approach to career counseling.** Watson (2004) contends that career counseling, career research and career education have for some time been hamstrung by the belief that the greater the extent to which a discipline can empirically validate its findings in terms of numerical quantifiers, the more valuable it is. Ever since its inception at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, career counseling has had an objective (positivist) orientation. The rapidly changing career situation, however, demands a contemporary approach that requires career counselors to take cognizance of the shift, and to adapt their academic discipline to accommodate these changes. Far too often, there is little evidence of the development of decision-making capacity, and indecision and lack of realism in career choice are perpetuated. An approach that regards clients as the sole experts on their own lives appears to be a better basis for helping clients negotiate transitions, choose careers and design their lives. Counselors should attempt to be useful to clients by for example offering spaces where clients can discover their personal characteristics, and develop and share past (and current) stories (experiences) as they attempt to navigate transitions and transcend the weaknesses of the past and present. The latter threaten clients' chances of making a decent living, establishing social connections and becoming self-determined (Blustein, 2010), i.e., designing successful lives and making valuable social contributions (Savickas et al., 2009). In the next section, I will elaborate on some basic principles that underlie the fourth wave approach to career counseling.

**A qualitative (postmodern) approach to career counseling.** Interest in qualitative assessment strategies and techniques (used in conjunction with traditional techniques) has grown significantly over the past few decades. Postmodern theoretical assumptions about career counseling are derived from the naturalistic (interpretive) paradigm described by, among others, Savickas (2005, 2006a, 2007a) and Hartung (2007). These assumptions are based largely on Savickas' (2005) hallmark contribution, namely career construction theory, which blends the major career counseling theories into one grand theory and implies that persons construct their own lives and careers by identifying (imposing meaning on) their vocational (work-related) behavior and numerous experiences in the workplace. The general aim of narrative career counseling is to help clients script their own life story – an approach that is suitable for helping clients explore personal meanings and find holding environments. An attempt is made to facilitate personal agency by viewing clients as active agents in their own personal development and by emphasizing clients' emotions and passions (Savickas, 2007b). These aims can best be achieved by attempting to answer the following questions during career counseling sessions (Pomerantz, 2008):

- a. How do we encourage people to tell their life history story in a way that informs counseling?
- b. How do we put a story into a perspective or a context, and why is this so important?
- c. How do we overcome a script or a stereotype that is unhelpful or counterproductive?

- d. How can we enable clients to better construct and share their stories?
- e. How do we attend to aspects that are overlooked or marginalized?

Social constructionism, which is pertinent to the qualitative approach, will now be elucidated briefly. After that I will focus explicitly on Mark Savickas' (2006a, 2006b) perspective on the qualitative approach, because of the importance attached to his contribution globally.

**Social constructionism.** According to social constructivist theory, knowledge and meaning are actively constructed through social interaction and relationships within a specific context. The meaning an individual attaches to a specific experience is accordingly inseparable from the context in which the actual experience takes place (Blustein, Palladino Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Maree, 2004; Palladino Schultheiss, 2005).

**Savickas' theory of career construction counseling for life designing.** The theory of life design counseling is strongly related to the theory of career construction. Consequently, the role of stories in the counseling process, it is discussed in more detail below.

**Savickas' career construction theory.** This theory views the individual's career as potentially a central part of his or her life and emphasizes the construction of career meaning in a unique context. It implies that individuals have the opportunity to identify the manner in which they want to fit a career into their lives. The focus is on career choice, adaptability and development as integrated processes. The four core concepts are emphasized: life structure, career personality, career adaptability and life themes (Savickas, 2005, 2008). Savickas (2002, 2005) argues that career construction not only offers a sound theoretical framework for understanding occupational behavior, but also provides a counseling strategy and methods that clients can use as they strive to achieve self-completion and make social contributions through their work. Hartung (2007, 2010) asserts that career construction theory updates and integrates Super's (1957, 1983) life-span/life-space theory and more specifically, Super's portrayal of the developmental perspective on vocational choice and adjustment.

Savickas (2005) and Hartung (2007) attribute this success to the attention afforded to and development of the following four vital dimensions of occupational and vocational behavior, namely (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). Career construction theory uses the narrative paradigm to transform these four theoretical dimensions into practice, and comprises a constructivist career counseling strategy and methods that encourage clients to (re-) author their lives and career stories. In achieving this, they enhance their opportunity to experience work as a personally meaningful endeavor, as a context for further development, and for making a social contribution.

Career construction theory and practice act as a grand meta-theory that melds and blends three core career theoretical traditions: individual development (the developmental approach), psychodynamic motivation (life themes and the narrative approach) and individual differences (the differential approach or person-environment fit) into an overarching theory of

occupational and vocational behavior. In doing so, Savickas (2002; 2005) has responded to repeated calls (prior to and after 1992) for convergence in career development theories. In addition, the process, patterns and content of career choice and development are dealt with effectively (Savickas & Lent, 1994). In summary: several dominant perspectives on occupational behavior and career are fused into a single meta-theory that takes into account: (a) life structure and career adaptability (*how* people organize their life roles and deal with career developmental tasks); (b) life themes (*why* people move in a particular life career direction), and (c) vocational personalities (*what* traits a person possesses) (Hartung, 2007; Savickas, 2002, 2005).

### Life Design Counseling

Three models of life design counseling can be identified in the literature. The first model (Campbell & Ungar, 2004) facilitates individuals' movement through seven underlying phases or episodes: (a) knowing what they want; (b) knowing what they have; (c) knowing what they hear; (d) knowing what is limiting them; (e) planning their preferred future; (f) growing into their story; and (g) growing out of their story. The second model (Zunker, 1998) uses postmodern techniques (e.g., lifeline, collage, role identification and fantasy) to help individuals design their lives. Interactive group discussions that focus on the personal application of these techniques enhance the life design process (Zunker, 1998). Central to both models is the construction of meaning through communication.

Regarding the third model, Savickas et al. (2009) maintain that a new social arrangement of work poses a series of questions and challenges to people who attempt to be useful to others as they develop their working lives. The authors explain that life designing for career intervention is based on five assumptions about people and their working lives, namely (a) contextual possibilities, (b) dynamic processes, (c) non-linear progression, (d) multiple perspectives and (e) personal patterns. Because their life design framework for career counseling puts into practice Guichard's (2005) theory of self-constructing and Savickas' (2005) theory of career construction – both of which describe occupational behavior and its development – it is structured to be life-long, holistic, contextual and preventive.

Individuals who need to adapt to continuous change have to develop various skills that can facilitate adaptation, not only in their careers, but also in their lives (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2006). Career and life planning should be an action-oriented, constructive process that can be executed in accordance with other aspects of an individual's life, such as personal beliefs and needs (Greene, 2006). A career may be viewed as a central part of life design, not an isolated part of a person's life, and should therefore be integrated into the individual's lifestyle instead of being de-contextualized. Through a process of life design, the individual is afforded the opportunity to develop a preliminary scheme or framework in which relevant concepts and ideas, specifically with regard to his or her life, can be incorporated (Zunker, 1998). One should consequently not focus on career development in isolation, but rather design a life that can be experienced as satisfactory by the individual and that can be redesigned as needs, interests and experiences change (Campbell & Ungar, 2004; Savickas, 1993). Factors that can influence the process of life design are discussed next.

**Factors that can influence the life design counseling process.** Savickas et al. (2009) explain that because occupational prospects appear far less definable and predictable nowadays, job transitions have become more frequent and compli-

cated. Workers have to develop skills and competences that differ widely from those that were needed to find an occupation and design a life during the previous century. Several unique factors currently play a role in the process of (and actually encourage) life design counseling. Greene (2006) identifies these factors as the individual's potential and ability, interests, personality and characteristics, expectations of significant others, and membership of a particular population group. According to Zunker (1998) an individual's perception of success, motivation to work, need for intrinsic satisfaction, different roles, relationships and developmental and contextual changes, play a key role in life design. Career adaptability in particular is a fundamental aim in career counseling for life designing and will be elaborated on next.

**Career adaptability.** Savickas et al. (2009) maintain that the usefulness of career counseling can be measured by its ability to effect important changes in the life stories of individuals (Soresi, Nota, Ferrari, & Solberg, 2008). To achieve important changes in the life stories of individuals, adaptability, narratability (the ability to articulate a life story), activity and intentionality (the intention to make meaning in one's life) have to be promoted. Adaptability is crucial in postmodern society and impacts on an individual's general wellbeing (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2006). Individuals are considered adaptable when they act in an appropriate manner in a specific situation. Different coping mechanisms are implemented by different individuals to promote their adaptability to different situations and such coping mechanisms tend to be consistent and include problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and avoidance behavior (Kohn, O'Brien-Wood, Pickering, & Decicco, 2003). Adaptability can be further divided into a number of dimensions, such as creative problem solving, handling of unpredictable situations, mastery of new assignments, demonstration of personal and cultural ability to adapt to changes, and ability to handle work stress and crisis situations (Pulakos et al., 2002).

In the next section, I will briefly delineate some practical implications of the movement towards a qualitative-quantitative approach to career counseling.

### Practical Implications of the Movement towards a Qualitative-Quantitative Approach to Career Counseling

As indicated earlier, career counseling as a discipline traditionally favored an objective (positivist) approach and career counselors traditionally depended on 'proven' assessment methods (Stead & Watson, 1998). Sophisticated media such as psychometric tests, work sheets and computer programs were used to form an objective image of an individual. The image was then matched with the character traits suited to a specific career. If the values, interests and abilities of the individual were considered congruent with the requirements of a specific career, it was assumed that the individual would find that career stable, productive and satisfying. The 'matching', 'objective' image was accepted as real and true (Watson, 2004).

Career theory, practice and assessment globally have been accused of failing to meet the needs of non-white, non-Western, non-'standard' populations (McMahon & Patton, 2002). According to Maree, Bester, Lubbe, and Beck (2001), counselors who implement current career-counseling models rely mainly on the results and profiles of psychometric tests that are problematic in diverse contexts, because the majority of these were developed in contexts that differ vastly from, for instance, developing country contexts. Furthermore, the value of the test results is often exaggerated and career counselors are often regarded as ex-

perts whose recommendations should be accepted. Clients often avoid the responsibility of making their own choices regarding a future career, and are often deprived of the opportunity to explore and develop. Career counseling therefore needs to move away from the almost sole use of psychometric tests to an approach that recognizes the individual's social and historical background.

The introduction of a theoretical framework that combines facets of a quantitative approach with story, narratives and qualitative assessment (a postmodern approach) seems essential. This framework could for instance promote counseling in traditional African society where the focus is on the group, story telling and *ubuntu* (respect for the dignity of other people). This approach is useful for clients other than upper and middle-class individuals who have access to state-of-the-art counseling and a wide range of careers (Winslade, 2007). However, Savickas (1993, p. 210), too, is at pains to emphasize the fact that it is not a matter of accepting either a quantitative or a qualitative approach. Quite the opposite: the legacy of the modern era, viz. objective methods, could be integrated into the postmodern career-counseling context: "To foster self-developers, we need to augment these objective constructs, not replace them". Whereas McMahon and Patton (2002) argue that both these approaches should be key elements of the assessment process, Amundson (2006) contends that the counseling continuum should start with some of the more traditional counseling and assessment methods and then go beyond them to include other, more dynamic approaches. He argues that one could imagine one pillar of Super's Archway bearing the more quantitative and rational counseling methods, and the other pillar bearing more dynamic methods, such as metaphor and story telling.

A word of caution as regards the way in which career counseling is presented in contexts that differ from countries with first world economies seems appropriate at this stage. While the world at large is currently experiencing the fourth economic wave, Africa at large, for instance, is often described as predominantly a developing (third world) continent with sizeable first world sectors and populations in places. The serious lack of skilled workers and the ever-growing number of unskilled, inappropriately skilled and low-skilled workers is well documented. The way in which the African economy is currently structured has a direct influence on and, in fact, co-dictates the way in which career counseling is presented. Whereas the typical one-to-one counseling paradigm may work well in first world countries, it is not yet a viable model for Africa. What is needed is a paradigm appropriate for and applicable to the large majority of any given country's population that remains in desperate need of any form of career counseling. Savickas (2006b) aptly remarks: "I keep repeating that the vocational guidance model is a superb model for countries that are still organized the way we were from 1900 to 1950. I am not saying any of these models are no good; it depends though, which type of economy you are working in."

### Conclusion

Career counseling as a profession has been influenced by four main paradigm shifts in psychology and the global economy over the past 120 years. There is an increasing realization that it is essential to advance a theory base for developing appropriate assessment instruments and an approach that will help clients see meaning in their careers, accept responsibility for their actions, become able to adapt to new demands, find new holding environments, and design successful lives. It is es-

sential to narrow the gap between the practice and theory of career counseling by ensuring that the client's subjective experience is considered during career counseling, in addition to the usual consideration of objective results obtained by means of (often antiquated) instruments and (often obsolete) career orientations. In this way deficiencies in contemporary practice could be resolved (Porfeli, 2003).

A viable, 21st century approach that yields results that are demonstrably related to work and life success is required. Savickas (2010, personal communication with the author) asserts that a crucial element of 21st century career counseling is the following: whereas in the past career counseling was aimed at highlighting individual differences, these days its emphasis has shifted to individuals themselves. Clients should, after career counseling, be better equipped to start confronting the complexities of negotiating a career pathway and become motivated to realize specific goals that could stand them in good stead in their career and life development. The ultimate aim is to enhance the design of individuals' lives so that they can negotiate transitions as and when challenges arise.

Several researchers emphasize the importance of empowering clients to design lives that are experienced as satisfactory and that can be redesigned as needs, interests and life experiences change (Campbell & Ungar, 2004; Savickas, 1993). Savickas (2002, 2005) and Hartung (2007, 2010) take this idea one step further and assert that the career-story interview (Hartung, 2010), a signature strategy in career construction for life designing, augmented by the use of the Three Anecdotes Technique (TAT), offers counselors an innovative, exciting and respectful way of being useful to clients who wish to find deeper meaning in their lives. It also enables counselors to help clients as they reflect on ways in which to negotiate transitions, write their life stories and design their lives. (In a related article in this issue, I will display the practical potential of the theoretical approach by investigating the usefulness of the TAT in career-story interviewing by counselors.)

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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The term “postmodern” in this article refers to approaches (e.g., narrative, contextual, and constructive) that emphasise the importance of our understanding of our occupations as they are being experienced (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002). This term is used interdependently together with a range of other terms. Alternatives used in the literature include qualitative, postmodern, as well as alternative career facilitation.