

Chapter 7 - The Role of Theory in Improving Evidence-Based Career Interventions

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What role does theory have in improving evidence-based career interventions? In this chapter, I will discuss the importance of using theory in interventions, the importance of integrating research in theory development, and the importance of integrating theory, research, and practice together. As Sampson et al.'s, (2014) review of the 2013 career literature demonstrated, the field does not integrate these areas well. They found nearly half of the articles in 2013 focused only on research, a third on theory, and less than a quarter focused on practice. Only 44% integrated theory, research, and practice. And yet, we are scientist-practitioners. Our field is premised on the belief that science informs practice, and practice informs science. As Heesacker and Lichtenburg (2014) pointed out, it is theory that ties science and practice together. Researchers propose, validate, and refine theories, and practitioners apply those theories. In an ideal world, practitioners would then have mechanisms to communicate with researchers about the need for further refinement and development of the theories.

Theory-Based Practice

As I began to consider writing this chapter, I realized my own wake-up call about the importance of theory-based practice. I can still remember the stark feeling of terror as I looked at the clock during my first session with a client during practicum. I had done all

the “right” things my professors had told me to do. I had listened carefully to the presenting problem, I had asked all the questions I was supposed to ask about family, education, background, and goals for counseling. The client had come to the University of Minnesota Student Counseling Bureau for help with choosing a major, and was struggling between the choice he wanted to make and the one his parents wanted him to make. I looked at the clock. All of this had taken only 20 minutes, and I was supposed to sit with him for at least 30 minutes more. I had no idea what to do, or say, or ask next. My supervisor and three of my cohorts were listening in the other room, and I knew I could not say, “Oh well, come back next week when I figure out what to ask you.”

Of course, what I needed to remember (back in 1977) was what theory I was employing to understand his problem and how that would shape my hypotheses and interventions. Did I think he needed information about his interests and how those related to different occupations? If so, Holland's (Holland, 1997; Nauta, 2013) theory would be helpful. Did he need to understand his abilities and needs and choose a good major that would lead to a satisfying career? Did he need help navigating the tension between his needs and his family's? If so, I might use the theory of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Swanson & Schneider, 2013). What role did he want work to play in his life relative to other roles? For that, I might use Super's theory (Hartung, 2013; Super, Savickas, &

Super, 1996). Or, if I was facing the situation now, I could use the social cognitive career theory (Lent, 2013; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) and wonder about his decision making self-efficacy or the outcomes expected of various choices, including the outcomes expected from his parents' evaluation of his choice.

The importance of theory in guiding what practitioners do has been highlighted by scholars writing about psychotherapy practice in general as well as career interventions specifically. Murdock (2017) noted that theories help us “know which stimuli to attend to and which to put in the background” (p. 4). She used a metaphor of a map to suggest that counselors who do not base their interventions on theory are similar to people who set out to drive to the other side of the country without a map. She noted that “counselors who don't use theory may get lost” (p. 4). My much younger self was lost without a theory to guide me.

Krumboltz (1994) also used a map metaphor in stressing the importance of career theories. He highlighted the similarity between maps and theories in that theories represented reality, or some portion of it; they omitted nonessentials to focus on specific behaviors important to the theory; exaggerated some behaviors to make a point; represented the unobservable; and are useful to answer one set of questions. He defined theory as “a simplified representation of some domain constructed so that users can ask questions about that domain with an increased probability of receiving valuable answers” (p. 12). Krumboltz's chapter was written for the 1992 Career Convergence conference, held to present various viewpoints on whether it was time to converge the various career theories into one. The general consensus was it was not possible, at least yet, possibly because each career theory represents a different focus on career behavior. Rereading the chapters in that book reminded me that we have been talking about the need to “heal the theory-practice gap,” as Lent and Savickas (1994) put it, for over 20 years.

In fact, conversations at that conference led Jane Swanson and I to discuss our frustrations in trying to teach career theories to our students. We hypothesized that, in part, students needed to see how to apply various theories and how the discipline of using a theory could help students conceptualize a client's career concerns and be more effective with that client. I could see my own

initial confusion about how to work with a client in my students. We decided to write a case book that would apply one client through all the theories so students could see how choosing a theory was important and led to different emphases. *Career Theory and Practice: Learning Through Case Studies* was first published in 1999, with the third edition published in 2015 (Swanson & Fouad, 1999; 2015). The most consistent feedback we have had from both students and instructors is that the process of applying the same case of Leslie with different theoretical lenses does, indeed, help students appreciate the importance of case conceptualization from a theoretical framework.

Integrating Research into Practice

Consider a scenario in which a career counselor, Jason, has a new client who is presenting with a career concern related to the client's unique identity status (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or a combination of any of these) that Jason has not yet experienced. Jason could ask his colleagues about how to deal with the situation, could continue with his favorite theoretical perspective (SCCT), hoping for the best, or could consult the literature. If there was little research on this concern, imagine that Jason could call the authors of the SCCT model and ask them what they think. Then, imagine that the authors say “Good question! We'll design a study to consider that, call you up to let you know what we find, and revise our theory accordingly.” This does sound far-fetched, but it is, in essence, the model we expect when we suggest practitioners should inform researchers about the real world issues they confront, and for researchers to communicate their findings in ways that make sense to practitioners. Or consider the scenario where the authors of the theory, who do an exemplary job of researching testable hypotheses from the theory, design a mechanism to seek out feedback from practitioners on how the theory works in real life. This seems difficult to do, time consuming, and might not give them the time to continue the exemplary research on the model. But, we still need a way to close the gap.

Murdock (2006) noted several reasons for the science-practice gap. First, our researchers study relatively circumscribed problems that may not relate well to the real world issues clients bring to counseling. Second,

the nature of careful scholarly writing enumerates the limitations of the research, which is important to understand in the context of scholarly inquiry but not necessarily helpful to individuals wanting immediate answers to their client-related questions. In addition, it may be hard to make sense of the many ways problems are defined or studied. Established scholars have a hard time sifting through many studies to come to some conclusions about research in an area, and it may be hard for practitioners to take the time to do that sifting or make sense of the results they find. Sampson, et al. (2014) also noted these as reasons for the research-practice gap, adding that researchers and practitioners use different language, which cannot help solve the communication problem.

I have been concerned about this for many years. In 2001, I wrote about this in a *Journal of Vocational Behavior* article on the future of the field:

Scientists do not talk enough to practitioners and vice versa. Our journals are either filled with sophisticated empirical investigations that do not inform practice, or poorly designed and evaluated career interventions that are not as effective as they could be. Thus, we are a parochial field.

I wrote about this again in 2014 in a *Counseling Psychology Quarterly* article about counseling psychology research, more generally, this time from the perspective of someone who had been a journal editor:

Practitioners do not have an effective mechanism to convey their research questions to scientists and may not necessarily explain the questions in ways that are easily translated to a research study. Researchers may not immediately think of the practical implications of their studies.

Add to this that the publication process is long, adding to the sense of disconnect. I had tried to create an initiative to address this when I was editor of *The Counseling Psychologist*. I created a Practitioner Forum and asked Jeff Prince to edit it. Our idea was that we would solicit ideas for forum on a topic that would be of primary interest to practitioners, invite someone to write on it, and speed the review process up by several weeks by keeping the articles short and practical. We did

have some Forum articles, but it was not the mechanism I envisioned to help address the gap. It was hard to find people to suggest topics and even harder to find people to write those articles. Practitioners are busy, and they clearly did not find this approach valuable.

But the science-practice gap is not a trivial matter. We need to find ways to address this gap, for our scientifically based career interventions are the core value we provide to the public. In fact, to my mind, the greatest threat to our profession is the great number of people who believe they can become a career coach with no training or background. Demonstrating that career counseling is based on sound, scientific evidence is our best way to argue that practitioners need to be trained to provide this service.

Integrating Theory, Practice, and Research

Murdock (2006) advocated for the use of theory in integrating research and practice. Acknowledging the huge amount of research from which to read and choose, she suggests that counselors choose only that research that focuses on their theoretical preferences. If the counselor does not have one particular theoretical perspective, she or he can choose the closest approximation to the issue with the largest body of research. This presumes that research must be theory-based. It also does not address the mechanism for feedback to go the other way, to inform the work of researchers. This is particularly an issue in research on career interventions themselves. If career theories are used to develop interventions, then the people applying those interventions need to have ways to communicate how the intervention did, or did not, work. Was it effective for some clients, and if so, which? Was it effective for some career concerns, and if so, which, and which were less effective? Was it more or less effective at some point in the career counseling process? The answers to these questions might help refine the development of theory as well as the effectiveness of future interventions.

Future Recommendations

I draw my recommendations from several individuals who have written about this recently: Pepler (2016), Heesacker and Lichtenberg (2012), Sampson et al., (2014). Pepler was writing as a Canadian

developmental psychologist. Heesacker and Lichtenberg were writing about counseling psychology research. Sampson et al. were writing about vocational psychology research.

1. Create teams of researchers and practitioners who collaboratively work to identify problems and ways to assess them from within a theoretical perspective.
 - a. Invest time, patience, and energy in the partnership. True partnerships take time to develop, especially with the need to ensure everyone is using the same language to communicate about the issues.
 - b. Investigate how research informs not only practice but policy. A research study in a university career center can be used to demonstrate the need for more resources.
 - c. Recognize that everyone in a partnership must benefit from that partnership. Be open and honest about the benefits needed in each setting.
2. Education and training programs can model this by fostering conversations between supervisors and faculty. Supervisors could be invited in to talk about how the research discussed may or may not be applied to real world problems.
3. Develop mechanisms, perhaps through a website, for practitioners to identify concerns they want future research studies to examine.
4. Develop mechanisms, through conference or newsletters, where researchers and practitioners can talk together about the efficacy of interventions and need for revision of theories.
5. Ensure that articles published in journals emphasize the integration of theory and research, and where appropriate, practice.

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