

Transitioning Contexts of Career Psychology in South Africa

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The present article explores the cultural relevance and appropriateness of career counselling in South Africa. The recursive influence of South Africa's apartheid era on the present and future directions for career psychology in South Africa is considered. While South Africa's historical past restricted the career development of individuals, the article explores how present realities continue to restrict such development. Several issues present in this phase of South Africa's transformation are identified that the career counselling profession in South Africa needs to address and redress. In particular, the article calls for a more integrated national initiative that will involve all stakeholders in the discipline.

McMahon and Yuen (2008) in their call for papers for this special issue of the *Asian Journal of Counselling* on internationalization and career counselling propose that the cultural relevance and appropriateness of career counselling in different national contexts needs to be examined. In addition, they suggest the indigenization of

career counselling as a possible response to the issue of relevance within particular cultural contexts. South African career psychology has begun to address (but not necessarily redress) this issue in more recent decades.

This discussion of South African career psychology is both systemic and contextual in nature. It reflects the international recognition that career counselling needs to be understood within specific cultural contexts (Leong & Blustein, 2000). While there are multiple contextual levels in South Africa that impact on individual career development (Naidoo, 2000), these multicultural, socio-political and economic contexts have received insufficient attention to date (Stead & Watson, 1998). The present article grounds the role of career psychology within the context of South Africa's past and present history and, in so doing, suggests future issues that career counsellors need to consider. In particular, the article considers the recursive influence of South Africa's political past on both the present and future directions of career psychology in this country. To illustrate this influence, the discussion makes use of African folk idioms which have been considered a neglected source of insight in the development of psychology in Africa (Nsamenang, 1995).

Acknowledging the Past

In reviewing the history of counselling psychology in South Africa, Watson and Fouche (2007) state that "our past has been more closely scrutinised than our present or future" (p. 153). Indeed, there have been several perspectives provided on the history of career psychology in South Africa over the last two decades (De Bruin & Nel, 1996; Stead & Watson, 1998, 2002, 2006; Watson & Stead, 2002). Common to all these perspectives is the recognition of the negative impact of the apartheid system on the career development of the majority of South Africans and the passive role that career psychologists played during that time. There has also been an international recognition that career

counselling and career education in South Africa has historically focused both on a white elite population and a trait-factor approach (Watts, 2009).

There is a Nigerian saying that “you may be inclined to think that you are the only planter if you have never entered another man’s plantation.” So it is with the Euro-centric history of career psychology in South Africa. It is generally acknowledged that South African career counselling, career assessment, and career research has by and large reflected international theories, models and measures, the appropriateness of which has been consistently challenged (Stead & Watson, 1998, 2006). The importation of such a career counselling framework has been criticized as contextually blind and contextually bound (Stead & Watson, 2002). This framework has also defined career counsellors as experts and prescribed career clients into more passive and receptive roles (Watson & Stead, 2002). Such a traditional approach to career counselling in South Africa has helped maintain the focus on individuals rather than communities (Watson & Stead, 2002) and, as a consequence, it has further marginalized “the perspectives on life of an already disadvantaged large majority of the population” (Mkhize & Frizelle, 2000, p. 6).

Thus, South Africa’s historical context has restricted rather than enhanced the career development of the vast majority of its citizens, and the discipline of career psychology has been prescriptive rather than descriptive in its understanding of career development behaviour. The recursive influence of this historical past on career counselling within the present realities in South Africa is described in the next section.

Inheriting the Past

McMahon, Arthur, and Collins (2008) contextualize the birth of career psychology at the start of the last century as occurring at a time of massive social change, with a growing gap between the rich and the

poor. It is a description that would hold for the present realities that South Africa faces. There is another Nigerian folk idiom that could be considered when exploring how the present realities of living in South Africa may impact on individual career development. This idiom states that poverty transforms a free person into a slave. Thus, individuals' options for career development may be constrained by the reality of the contextual and systemic environments within which they live.

The literature on career counselling in South Africa has more readily identified historically negative constraints than it has addressed present negative realities. In part, this could be explained by the need to allow time for new power structures to redress decades of negative oppression. Yet career psychologists also need to recognize that inequalities persist 15 years after the democratization of South Africa, in part because of dysfunctional administration at the policy implementation level. Thus, Macleod (2006) describes the dichotomy between progressive constitutions and policies and the consistent lack of implementation of such policies. Further, she points to other macro-systemic factors which could impact on career development, for example that post-apartheid South Africa now finds itself in a more global network of "post-capitalism, developmentalism and neo-colonial cultural hegemony" (p. 368).

Career counsellors need to recognize these realities in suggesting the way forward for career counselling in South Africa, for Prilleltensky (1997) suggests that values proposed at a micro level may well be undermined by realities at the macro level. In short, macro-systemic factors can create an environment of career oppression which career practitioners need to challenge and work with in their profession. Thus, Watson and Stead (2002) warn of the threat to career psychology of the economic realities of a transforming South African society. It is to some of these present realities that attention is now turned.

The macro-environment of South Africa within which career counselling is practised is that of a developing nation faced with severe constraints on its finances and infrastructure. Statistical surveys illustrate the quality of life that the majority of South Africans experience. For instance, of the 18.3 million children in South Africa in 2007, 20% were orphans, 40% lived in households where there was no breadwinner, and two-thirds lived in income poverty (Pendlebury, Lake, & Smith, 2009). The state of education for the majority of South African children is also cause for concern, particularly as level of education can impact on individual career development.

There has been a continuous development of education policy and strategy since 1994 and a dramatic increase in enrolment figures at the primary and secondary school levels (although over 400,000 children between the ages of 7 and 15 years are presently out of school; see Govender, 2009). Yet, Pendlebury (2009) reports that educational policy has not been implemented in schools and concludes that schools still “have a long way to go to enable all, or even most, children to learn to read, write, reason, and work with numbers” (p. 26). Part of the reason for this state of affairs is the persistence of poor educational infrastructure with unqualified teachers, textbook shortages, inadequate time devoted to teaching in schools, and issues around the language medium of instruction. All these issues have been reported on consistently over the last decade. A consequence of the present state of education in South Africa is the large-scale failure in literacy and numeracy in the elementary years (Jansen, 2009).

There are similar problems in the implementation of career education in South African schools. While Watts (2009) sees the development of compulsory life orientation programmes (within which career education is subsumed) as an encouraging sign, Flederman (2009) reports that most teachers of this curriculum are overwhelmed by

its implementation. During the apartheid era, there were several community-based career centres that were created in order to redress the lack of career education at disadvantaged schools. It was hoped that these centres of excellence would survive and contribute to formal career education in the post-apartheid era (Watts, 1996) but this has largely not happened.

Another macro issue is how slowly the field of psychology, in general, and career psychology, in particular, have redefined and repositioned themselves in post-apartheid South Africa. There remains a preoccupation with intervention at the individual level with insufficient exploration of the impact of structural social, political and economic factors that continue to oppress the career development of the majority of South Africans (Naidoo, 1996). Blustein and McWhirter (2000) argue that career psychology needs to address the “experience-near” (p. 7), but Naidoo (2000) describes the “psychological distance” of South African psychologists and their interventions from the majority population (p. 6).

One practical reason for this distance is the ratio of psychologists to the general population which recently stood at 4 psychologists per 100,000 people (Petersen, 2004). Another reason for this distance is reflected in what Macleod (2006) refers to as value-neutral scientific models of theory and research. Such models are largely decontextualized and limited in their focus on urban and middle-class populations. Painter and Terre Blanche (2004) indeed identify the growth in South African psychology as still leaning towards an American-style, market-oriented approach. A consequence of this is the dominance of white psychologists in the profession in South Africa. Black career psychologists believe that the profession is poorly equipped to deal with cultural diversity issues and that much of what is presently reflected in the career literature does not translate into practical strategies and counselling

methods (Mkhize, 2004; Watson, 2006b). All this has reinforced negative perceptions of the profession as continuing to serve a privileged minority, raising questions about the relevance of what career psychology does (Watson & Fouche, 2007). The present realities impacting on career counselling in South Africa call for several issues to be addressed and redressed in the future.

Redressing the Past

A central challenge facing the career counselling profession in South Africa is the need for it to redefine itself in terms of its theory and research base and its counselling and assessment approaches. This redefinition of career psychology in South Africa has been stressed for the last decade (Stead & Watson, 1998) and calls for the reconstruction of career counselling within the socio-cultural milieu in which it would practise.

Cheung (2000), in calling for the deconstruction of counselling within specific cultural contexts, suggests that the core questions we face are: counselling by whom, counselling for whom, and counselling for what. Answering such seemingly simple questions within a transforming society, however, is a complex task as is evident in the fact that the South African counselling profession has struggled with an identity issue for some time. Thus, Watson and Fouche (2007) state that the identity of the profession “seems to be in as transitional a state as the country itself” (p. 155).

Contributing to this inertia in redefining career counselling is the dichotomous tension between career counsellors’ theoretical and professional training and the realities of the South African context. It calls for South African career counsellors to challenge the grand narratives of their training with the local narratives created by contextual realities (Watson, 2006a). This would require a paradigm shift, with

some feeling that the redefinition of career counselling in South Africa requires a movement away from its psychological foundations towards a more sociological perspective (Flederman, 2009). However, it may prove unwise to simply replace one disciplinary framework with another and wiser to heed the call in the international career literature to think across a variety of interrelated disciplines.

Cheung's (2000) three questions could be supplemented with the further question of "counselling with what." This question addresses the relevance of career theories, practice models, and assessment processes for the contexts in which South African career counsellors work. The discipline of career psychology is itself a cultural enterprise which insufficiently acknowledges the cultural contexts within which it is applied (Watson, 2006b). There has been a call for South African career counsellors and researchers to periodically question the meaningfulness and appropriateness of their theoretical and applied frameworks (Watson & Stead, 2002). This has led to a debate concerning the merits of an indigenization of extant, Westernized theories and counselling models.

The debate addresses the call by the guest editors for this special issue to consider the issue of indigenization. Here caution should prevail. While there is undoubtedly a need to challenge and redefine theory (Macleod, 2006), such attempts would be wise to consider universal principles that might underlie any career theory. In addition, indigenizing career theory and practice takes time and effort and in a developing nation such as South Africa, there is a limited pool of individuals who might address this issue. In recent times, there has been an attempt by several career professionals to rather move towards more qualitative, narrative, and constructivist approaches in order to less prescriptively ground the career development of South Africans (Maree & Molepo, 2006; Mkhize & Frizelle, 2000; Watson & McMahon, 2009).

Constructivist and narrative approaches can provide career counsellors with a broader, more encompassing perspective on clients' career development. They have the potential to address diverse cultural perspectives by focusing on how clients perceive their world. Thus a client's career story can be embedded within the cultural context of the client. Maree and Molepo (2006), in particular, argue that narrative approaches show promise in the deconstructing, co-constructing and re-constructing of the experiences and career aspirations of African individuals and communities. This newer wave of career approaches may make eminent sense within the African context where story telling is an integral aspect of African culture. In this regard, Maree and Molepo believe that "tapping into this practice constitutes a spontaneous way of introducing a storied approach to career counselling" (p. 75).

Related to the discussion of the redefinition of career theory, research and practice is the issue of redefining the role of career counsellors. Macro-contextual factors in South Africa impact negatively on the career development of most South Africans. The trend in South African career literature has been to increasingly recognize negative contextual factors that impede career development, yet much of this recognition remains at a descriptive level and fails to translate into meaningful application (Watson & Stead, 2002). In part, this is a consequence of most career practitioners being trained in Westernized theories and practising in micro- (e.g., the individual) and meso- (more affluent schools and universities) contexts (Watson & Stead, 2002). There is a resultant negative recursive relationship between career psychology and the macro-environment in South Africa. While the present scope of career counselling in South Africa fails to sufficiently address macro-systemic factors and focuses on micro- and meso-contextual levels, these macro-systemic factors impact significantly (and negatively) on career development at the micro- and meso-contextual levels.

One way that the profession of career counselling could address macro-systemic influences on individual career development in South Africa is to adopt a more activist and critical role. The history of career psychology in South Africa demonstrates that the profession failed to voice itself during the apartheid era. As a consequence, it was seen to be in the service of a succession of repressive governments (Nicholas, Naidoo, & Pretorius, 2006). There have been more recent calls for the profession to ensure that it does not repeat history and remain silent in this transitional phase of South Africa's history (Watson & Stead, 2002). The lack of effective policy implementation in critical macro-contextual fields such as education requires career psychologists to express their concern. An activist voice in this regard has been the report prepared by Flederman (2009) on the state of career education in South Africa at this point in its history.

Cheung's (2000) questions imply that career counselling in South Africa may need to be deconstructed in order that the discipline may be reconstructed. An issue that will need to be tackled in this process is the lack of centralized leadership to guide such a deconstruction process. The Ugandans have an idiom that states that the ants are in disarray because of a lack of leadership. So it is with the career counselling profession in South Africa. To date, there have been isolated and sometimes discordant voices that have attempted to challenge issues in the field. Most of these voices have been sited in academic spheres. Watson and Fouche (2007), in considering the state of counselling psychology in general in South Africa, call for an integrative profession with a vision that will cohere the fragmentation and diversity that is evident in the discipline at present. Similarly, Walters (2009) calls for a national forum to address and redress career education issues in South Africa and suggests a "Guidance Council" that could provide strategic leadership in this regard. Walters's call stresses the urgency of this need for leadership and therein lies another point to consider.

There is a Kenyan idiom that states that “hurry hurry has no benefits.” The idiom cautions that there is little merit in doing things too hastily. The transformation of the career counselling profession in South Africa will need to find a balance between expectations that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency and those issues that should be addressed at a more realistic pace. It is a dilemma that the profession of psychology as a whole will need to grapple with in this country — that is, the need to address and redress historically accumulated macro-systemic problems in a meaningful and sustainable manner. For instance, there is recognition that the translation of knowledge generation and research in South African psychology into meaningful application will not meet the expectations of society at large in the short term (De la Rey & Ipser, 2004; Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004; Watson & Fouche, 2007).

This suggests another challenge for career psychology in South Africa and that is “how to work qualitatively in what is largely a quantitative world” (Watson, 2008, p. 10). How does one balance the urgency raised by quantity issues (large numbers of people requiring effective career services) with quality concerns (grounding one’s efforts in research, for instance, in order to assess the validity of what one does)? An example of this dilemma is the suggestion, arising from the recent survey of career education services in South Africa, that a careers guidance helpline should be established (Flederman, 2009). The report recognizes that career information is as effective as it is understood and processed. Thus, Watts (2009) in the same report cautions that providing a service that reaches large groups in need of career information will require a concomitant individual guidance service. Watts quite rightly states that personal support will be needed if individuals are to “understand this information and relate it to their personal needs, and then to convert it into personal action” (p. 10). The one type of career service may prove easier to implement than the other.

There is a Ugandan idiom that states that the track of only one person is narrow, thus suggesting that someone working on his or her own does not achieve as much as those who work together. It is perhaps a fitting note with which to end this discussion of career counselling in South Africa. While the present author recognizes that there are pockets of excellent work in the development of career theory and practice in South Africa, these efforts remain too insular and fail to impact significantly on the macro-systemic factors that impede individual career development in this country. The time has come for a greater consolidated effort in South Africa, a broadening of the career psychology track by the cohesive footwork of a body of policymakers, academics, and practitioners in the field.

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南非事業心理學的過渡

本文探討南非事業輔導的文化適切性，剖析南非種族隔離年代的制度如何影響事業心理學現今和未來的方向。過往，南非的情況限制了個人的事業發展，而現今的情況依然沒有改變。本文指出了南非事業輔導專業如今必須正視和糾正的有關問題，強調要推出能整合專業內所有持分者的國家措施。