

Existential and Chaos Theory: “Calling” for Adaptability and Responsibility in Career Decision Making

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Abstract

Although the skills promoted by career decision-making models based on information processing, social cognition, and person–environment fit are necessary for general career success, they insufficiently meet the demands of a global society and the current economy. The purpose of this article is to raise awareness of two holistic approaches to career decision making: existential and the chaos theory of careers. We propose that these models are more suitable for today’s working world insofar as they promote career adaptability, vocation/calling (beyond job), and moral responsibility in work in the postmodern era. However, because their utility has not yet been extensively researched (despite ample theoretical exposure in the career literature), these models remain relatively unfamiliar to most career counselors. For each model, we provide a theoretical overview, review existing research, and propose areas for further study to identify contexts for which each model may be best suited.

Keywords

career decision making, career counseling, existential, chaos theory of careers

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Transformation increasingly has become a defining characteristic of work. A generation ago, people could more readily identify themselves by their work, and work roles tended to be characterized by the kinds of people associated with them; today, however, the tables have turned. It is harder for individuals to rely on their job titles as a shield against rapid change. Rather, they must be prepared to change work roles at any time and for their identities and relationships to become modified in turn by their new roles.

Clinicians' understandings of and responses to career decision-making needs also have been transformed during the early 21st century. Clinicians increasingly have come to acknowledge that neither the reality of the world of work nor that of the workers themselves is as straightforward as was previously purported. Although the skills promoted by customary career decision-making models based on information processing (e.g., Gati, 1986), social cognitive theory (e.g., Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), and person–environment fit (e.g., Holland, 1997) are necessary for general career decision making and success, on their own they are insufficient to meet the demands of today's working world—which may be characterized by complexity, constant flux, and interdependence (Bright & Pryor, 2011; Pryor, 2010). Careers are regarded less as a single choice and more as a series of transitions, decisions, and adjustments throughout the life span (Fouad & Bynner, 2008).

These characteristics of work in the 21st century have served as an allegorical foundation for more germane understandings of how people make career decisions in light of both their environmental demands and their inner promptings. In turn, the customary models of career decision making identified previously have given way to those that emphasize career adaptability (Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009; Van Vianen, De Pater, & Preenen, 2009), the dynamic dialectic interplay between intuitive and emotional processes *and* rational processes (Krieshok et al., 2009; Murtagh, Lopes, & Lyons, 2011), and the power of individuals to construct their own career narratives via a collaborative process with career counselors (Savickas, 2011, 2012).

The purpose of this article is to raise awareness of two holistic approaches to career decision making that have emerged in the career literature during the last quarter century: existential and the chaos theory of careers (CTC). Similar to constructivist/narrative career decision making (e.g., Savickas, 2012), the existential and CTC models emphasize a process of deconstructing, reconstructing, and coconstructing clients' sense of career identities. However, they arguably go a step further by providing sets of philosophical principles that serve as motifs for guiding the counseling process.

We propose that the existential and CTC models are suitable for today's working world insofar as they promote career adaptability, vocation or calling (beyond job), and moral responsibility in work in the postmodern era. Rather than offer a mechanical set of technical procedures that place the career counselor in the expert role, these models involve an organic, evolving process in which clients are invited to reflect on their lived experience to clarify values, to overcome obstacles, and to

develop here-and-now sensitivity, tolerance of ambiguity, and awareness of their *possible selves* in the world of work. Although these models have been given ample theoretical exposure in the career literature, they remain relatively unfamiliar to most career counselors because their utility has not yet been extensively researched.

We believe that this is due in part to the fact that the highly individualized and transformative nature of the existential and CTC models does not easily lend itself to conventional empirical investigation (i.e., hypothesis testing) and standardization (see Schneider & Krug, 2010). Rather, research on these models to date has served to support their philosophical underpinnings and the practical utility of interventions informed by their underlying principles (see Pryor & Bright, 2011). Nevertheless, given the increasing legitimacy of qualitative and mixed-methods inquiry for evidence-based practice, we believe that the existential and CTC models now have a greater opportunity to become appropriately demonstrated, appreciated, and embraced. For each model, we provide a theoretical overview, review existing research, and propose areas for further study to identify contexts for which each model may be best suited.

Beyond Simplistic Solutions to Complex Problems

We now will outline some of the principal limitations of customary career decision-making models, as they apply to the existential and the CTC models.

Limitations of the Customary Models

Career decision-making models based on information processing, social cognitive theory, and person–environment fit were founded on two assumptions (Van Vianen et al., 2009). The first was that making the right choices based on the right attitudes eventually leads to a point of career stability and satisfaction within an existing paradigm of career options. The second assumption was that career indecision is the outcome of poor decision-making strategies. These models were primarily geared toward young people setting out into the world of work for the first time or people with chronic career difficulties.

These customary models of career decision making overlooked the dynamic, interactive, and adaptive nature of human functioning in the world (Pryor & Bright, 2003). They did not adequately take into consideration that (a) people’s interests, attitudes, and abilities may change with experience; (b) rational decision making is not always practical or favorable in the face of life’s complexities and in vocational situations where a range of influences (from the economy to weather to technology) can change at different paces and in different degrees; (c) individuals may not always be happy with their decisions, no matter how much thought they put into them; (d) individuals’ *best fit* career path may not necessarily be available in their community; (e) today individuals are faced with more choices than ever before; and (f) the current social and economic climate actually may exacerbate anxiety and self-

doubt and therefore *contribute* to career indecision (Pryor & Bright, 2011; Van Vianen et al., 2009).

To elaborate, today's workplace is becoming less predictable, more risky, more automated, and more globalized in both the consumer and the labor market spheres. Pryor and Bright (2011) identified (a) faster speed of communication; (b) more rapid development of technologies (and therefore alternative skill sets, products, and services); (c) more frequent turnover, restructuring of organizations, and reliance upon contractual agreements; and (d) increased need for lifelong learning as "some of the 'new realities' for 21st century work" (p. 3). The overall effectiveness of customary career decision-making models is questionable insofar as they rely on "stable occupations and predictable organizational career paths that have all but disappeared" (Maglio, Butterfield, & Borgen, 2005, p. 77). Although during the 20th century workers could rely on corporate schemas "to provide a grand narrative about how their lives would unfold" (Savickas, 2012, p. 13), today promotions tend to take place more between—rather than within—employers (Bridges, 1994; Krieshok et al., 2009). Marketable employees tend to be those with transferrable skill sets, who can (a) enter flexibly into ever-changing work roles and work conditions; (b) demonstrate adaptability and mastery by applying principles from previous learning to novel situations and contexts; (c) regard their personalities, strengths, and work values not as solid entities but as emerging possibilities; and (d) offer their individual abilities in a collaborative setting (Bridges, 1994; Krieshok et al., 2009; Van Vianen et al., 2009).

Alternatives

A paradigm shift that involves a progression from career decision-making approaches that are reductionistic to those that are more reflective, holistic, and transformative is in order. Bright and Pryor (2005) suggested that career counselors should (a) encourage clients to depart from the notion of an ideal or perfect career and (b) surrender the expert role and become more comfortable assisting clients with developing meaning and purpose within their own phenomenological frames of reference. Crucial for our times are models that not only provide vocational guidance and career education but also support defining one's place in the world in the interests of "pursuing [one's] purpose and projects with integrity and vitality" (Savickas, 2012, p. 14) and of developing a sense of meaning in and commitment to something beyond oneself (Koehn, 1986; Schultze & Miller, 2004).

The existential and CTC models explored in this article emphasize (a) embracing, not avoiding, uncertainty—both for the client and for the career counselor (Koehn, 1986; Miller, 1995); (b) attending to clients' narratives and language, focusing on and mirroring emergent patterns and processes that are not explicitly spoken (Bright & Pryor, 2005; Hansen, 2005); (c) incorporating emotional intelligence into career decision making (see Murtagh et al., 2011); and (d) empowering clients to take a more active role in decision making (Bloland & Walker, 1981; Bright & Pryor,

2005; Homan, 1986). These models rely less on how-to intervention techniques and more on a philosophical attitude. They require career counselors to utilize the career counseling relationship as a vehicle for change whereby clients vicariously develop presence, courage, and wisdom via counselors modeling that which they have cultivated in themselves (Homan, 1986).

Existential career decision making emphasizes using the immediacy of the counseling relationship to assist clients with clarifying a career path in which they may contribute to the well-being of their communities by authentically and adaptively engaging in work that provides a sense of personal fulfillment. CTC takes this process a step further by encouraging clients to extend their search for work that provides an embodied experience of aliveness into the tasks of surrendering individual self-identity, of developing a multitude of emerging potentials, and of establishing interdependent connections with a life force/source beyond both themselves and their immediate surroundings. We will now present the existential and CTC models of career decision making. For each model, we provide a theoretical overview, review existing research, and propose areas for further study to identify contexts for which each model may be best suited.

Existential Career Decision Making

Existential psychology emerged during the mid-20th century in part out of concern that careers in American society had become fragmentally reduced to *jobs* with little regard for their relationships to the other domains of a person's life (McIlroy, 1979) and for the fuller sense of one's personal *vocation* or *calling* (Frankl, 1986; Homan, 1986).

Overview of Career Decision-Making Theory

Career counseling from an existential perspective assists individuals with maintaining a sense of personal authenticity, integrity, and responsibility in the face of rapid change (Maglio et al., 2005). Authenticity is understood as acting in accordance with one's life values, and integrity as congruence between these values and one's professional attitudes, which results in commitment to and deeper meaning in clients' work for themselves and for others (Frankl, 1986; Hansen, 2005). Existential career decision making promotes clients' (a) adaptively engaging in work that provides a sense of fulfillment and worthiness (Cohen, 2003) despite the constraints they may face in their career options and (b) contributing fully of themselves to their community.

Existential career interventions. Existential career decision making involves exploring how clients subjectively experience themselves and their quality of life in their career search, assessing career possibilities that are congruent with their sense of authentic self, and encouraging them to move beyond their real and perceived barriers (Hansen, 2005; McIlroy, 1979). Rather than motivating people toward action,

however, this approach involves asking clients what they did and did not enjoy in previous work and listening for and reflecting back clients' basic assumptions about their career values and potential (Cohen, 2003; Hansen, 2005). Frankl (1986) explained:

It [is] necessary to show [clients] that the job at which one works is not what counts, but rather the manner in which one does the work. It does not lie with the occupation, but always with us, whether the elements of the personal and the specific which constitute the uniqueness of our existence are expressed in the work and thus make life meaningful. (p. 118)

Clinicians meet and work with clients on their terms and intervene as appropriate via building and acting on teachable moments as they arise from clients' narratives (Maglio et al., 2005). For example, Cohen (2003) suggested that clinicians point out when they recognize that clients may have made previous career decisions impulsively (i.e., without adequately evaluating their preferences) or compulsively (i.e., based on others' preferences).

Clients are invited (a) to confront ultimate human dilemmas and negative internal forces (i.e., the defense mechanisms they utilize to protect themselves from feeling anxious in the face of these dilemmas) without fear of reproach or retribution and (b) to use this experience to reframe their struggles and to extend the boundaries of their comfort and of their competence in the world of work (Cohen, 2003). To illustrate, Maglio et al., (2005) offered a process framework for clinicians to attune to clients' experiences with unemployment, career burnout, or transition that incorporated Yalom's (1980) existential themes.

- *Death*—The birth of a new career requires the death of an old one; clients are encouraged to process their loss as much as to prepare for a new career.
- *Freedom/responsibility*—When people are dissatisfied with or unable to manage their career, they have responsibility for it and therefore also the will to change it; clients are encouraged to reframe their fear of choice, thereby supporting the creation of a new life structure.
- *Isolation*—Clients are encouraged to process their feelings of isolation associated with unemployment in an effort to normalize the emotions, to build acceptance, and to reconnect with and draw on social resources.
- *Meaninglessness*—Honoring the totality of clients' experience, including both pain and hope, invites the fullness of clients' experience into the counseling process and therefore clarifies how clients make meaning of their work.

In addition, Rogers (1990) provided a career decision-making protocol that encourages clients to choose whether they will deny or accept thoughts regarding their mortality and the significance of these thoughts for the remaining portion of their lives. Clients who choose an acceptance strategy typically experience a

fundamental, transformative change in their self-concept, which first leads to a life evaluation process and then to an occupational evaluation process, which results in their judging the congruence or incongruence between their career paths and their reformulated self-concept.

Existing Research Support

To date, relatively little research has been published on existential career decision making. Despite the relevance of work and careers in classic writings in existential psychology (e.g., Frankl, 1978, 1986; Maslow, 1962/1999), as of November 2012, a search of the PsycINFO and ERIC databases using the key words “existential” and “career decision-making” or “career counseling” yielded fewer than 15 articles, dissertations, and presentations. Most of the extant literature (e.g., Bloland & Walker, 1981; Cohen, 2003; Hansen, 2005; Homan, 1986; Hood, 1993; Koehn, 1986; Maglio et al., 2005; McIlroy, 1979; Rogers, 1990; Schultze & Miller, 2004) provided preliminary suggestions as to how existential psychology principles may be applied in a career counseling context. Ironically, although “existential psychotherapy has produced some of the most eloquent case studies in the professional literature” (Schneider & Krug, 2010, p. 92), the majority of these articles offered only brief case vignettes (some as short as three to four sentences) to demonstrate key points with little elaboration about the *experience* of the decision-making process both for the client and for the clinician.

We believe that this dearth of research support is partly attributable (a) to the fact that, until recently, qualitative and mixed-methods research (with which existential theory is more compatible, as discussed earlier) had not yet gained the fuller legitimacy they now hold in psychology/counseling and (b) to the historical relative dominance of other models of career decision making (i.e., those identified at the beginning of this article) that more easily lent themselves to conventional empirical support. With this in mind, Tinsley (1994) remarked that vocational psychology “suffers because important theories are too quickly forgotten in the rush to the latest trend . . . long before their usefulness has been exhausted” (pp. 108–109) and that appreciation of a broader range of supporting methods may alleviate this problem. Thus, regardless of the shortage of research support thus far, we believe that there is a promising future for existential career decision making. Although existential theory has remained relatively obscure in the career counseling arena (despite its more pervasive influence in other domains of therapeutic practice, Schneider & Krug, 2010), we argue that the potential credibility of existential career decision making (a) is demonstrated by the consistent calls for renewed interest in an existential approach to career counseling every few years in the career literature since the late 1970s and (b) may now be more adequately supported with more suitable research methods.

We believe that the existential model is particularly applicable and beneficial in the conditions of the current American economy. For clients who are accustomed to

having the course of their lives determined by extrinsic sources and motivation, the contemporary workplace may breed anxiety and despair as the illusion of security and stability falls away, and one is faced with the responsibility of choosing and creating one's own destiny and authentic identity (Homan, 1986). Existential career decision making offers "a deeper inquiry . . . that touches the very spirit of an individual and exposes the deep concerns which plague human existence" (Koehn, 1986, p. 177). In contrast, customary models of career decision making (i.e., those identified at the beginning of this article) merely espouse performing a *job* at the expense of inwardly searching for one's *vocation* or *calling*—doing what one was put on earth to do, one's "opportunity for fulfillment" (Frankl, 1986, p. 118), "that [which] is hungered for in the depths of one's being" (Homan, 1986, p. 20). In turn, existential career decision making provides an antidote to the proneness in the current American zeitgeist to disconnection and alienation (Olds & Schwartz, 2009) and therefore to a moral vacuum (i.e., "A job cannot be a vocation . . . if I am only responsible to myself," Schultze & Miller, 2004, p. 145).

Proposed Populations and Suggestions for Future Research

Existential career decision making may be particularly relevant for clients whose career decision making is impeded by unemployment anxiety (Hood, 1993), by career burnout (Malach-Pines, 2000; Malach-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001; Schultze & Miller, 2004), by difficulty making career decisions without external input (Bloland & Walker, 1981; Cohen, 2003; Homan, 1986; Koehn, 1986), or by mid-life career transition (Rogers, 1990).

Unemployment anxiety. Conformity to conventional expectations of employment without ample exploration of one's values and fuller potential poses a disservice to oneself and to one's society (Frankl, 1986; Maslow, 1962/1999). From an existential perspective, unemployment anxiety occurs when individuals feel inadequate from having mistaken their work roles for their greater self-identities:

There is a false identification of one's calling with the life task to which one is called. This incorrect equating of the two necessarily makes the unemployed person suffer from the sense of being useless and superfluous The unemployed become increasingly indifferent and their initiative . . . trickles away. This apathy is not without grave dangers. It makes people incapable of grasping the helping hand which may be extended to them. (Frankl, 1986, p. 124, 121)

Hood (1993) provided suggestions for helping clients deal with job loss—which, similar to the death of a loved one, can interfere with individuals' ability to make new decisions. We suggest that future narrative analysis and case study research explore the transformative impact of and principles of change within the counseling relationship to assist clients overcome ennui and better differentiate between work as self-identification and work as authentic self-expression. We suggest using recent

research into the topic of therapeutic presence (e.g., Geller & Greenberg, 2012; Tannen & Daniels, 2010) as a starting point and then extending those principles into the domains of career counseling/decision making from an existential perspective.

Beyond burnout. Career stagnation and burnout occur when individuals come to feel that they no longer are making a significant contribution and that their chosen jobs do not align with their inner values (Malach-Pines, 2000; Malach-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001; Schultze & Miller, 2004). These authors provided case vignettes of the relationship between burnout and career decisions initially (and unconsciously) made to overcome personal obstacles such as dysfunctional family dynamics (e.g., a middle-aged manager struggling with burnout confronted his need for recognition associated with lack of support from his father; Malach-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001). The authors also suggested means by which clinicians may encourage clients' freedom in and responsibility for their vocational condition in the face of burnout. In some cases, this could entail seeking new work (e.g., a young woman gave up a career in which she was living for others and replaced it with a more fulfilling position in a different field wherein she could achieve a better balance between her career interests and talents and her family life; Malach-Pines & Yafe-Yanai, 2001). In other cases, it may involve reframing one's role in one's current position (e.g., a professor utilized paradoxical intention to transform his fatalistic view of unmotivated students and his propensity toward poor self-care; Schultze & Miller, 2004).

Herein lies an important facet of existential career decision making that in some cases, the best choice may be to *stay* in one's current position with a renewed sense of meaning in the work. We suggest that further research explores this phenomenon, particularly in the present economy wherein work alternatives may not be plentiful despite dissatisfaction with a current position. We suggest that techniques such as focusing (see Friedman, 1986; Gendlin, 1981) and emotional referencing (see Doi & Ikemi, 2003) can be utilized to encourage clients to actively explore their experiences of burnout. In addition, perceptual inquiry (see Barrell, Aanstoos, Richards, & Arons, 1987) may serve as a research method that involves *reading behavior backward* to infer the personal organization of meanings associated with burnout as a critical incident that affects these clients' functioning in a variety of settings.

Self-actualization in younger clients. In today's society, young adults have become impatient with career counseling services that offer little more than conventional options involving either further training or a corporate position (Robbins & Wilner, 2001). We suggest that existential career decision making has benefits for young adult clients who are initially setting out into the world of work. Clinicians may encourage young individuals' awareness that they are not only responsible for their career choices but also for their failure to choose (Bloland & Walker, 1981; Cohen, 2003; Homan, 1986; Koehn, 1986). Clinicians may assist clients with assuming responsibility for selecting a career (or a college major) based on their inner promptings without becoming dependent upon others to make the vocational choice for them.

Furthermore, in light of humanistic–existential theory of motivation and personality (e.g., Maslow, 1970), we suggest that existential career decision making may especially benefit clients whose basic needs have been adequately fulfilled and who seek meaning in a career that extends beyond conventional survival. To illustrate, Walker and Burgess' (2011) phenomenological analysis explored 10 professional jazz musicians' engagement in a lifelong project of creating an authentic voice despite devoting their lives to careers that conventionally could be considered financially unstable. The research emphasized characteristics such as healthy risk taking, intrinsic motivation, interpersonal attunement, growth through challenge, and commitment to one's life project despite obstacles that typically undermine people's motivation to continue on an unconventional path.

We suggest that both of these themes—the processes of overcoming dependence on outside sources to make life decisions and of developing a career path that transcends survival—may serve as the basis for future research on the experience of existential career decision making for younger clients. In addition to phenomenological analysis (as utilized in Walker and Burgess' study discussed above), we also suggest the experiential method (see Barrell et al., 1987) as a means of identifying and illuminating common factors that both guide and emerge from the decision-making process.

Mid-life career transition. As noted above, Yalom's (1980) existential themes of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness have served as the basis for several theoretical papers on existential career counseling (e.g., Koehn, 1986; Maglio et al., 2005; Rogers, 1990). The latter two authors offered frameworks for career decision making based on these themes, the second of which dealt directly with mid-life career transitions. Given the relevance of these themes for middle-aged populations (Becker, 2006), we suggest that further case study research could explore how they pertain to career decision making for clients faced with career transitions during middle adulthood. In addition, we propose that heuristic inquiry (see Douglass & Moustakas, 1985) can be utilized to portray the counselor's experience of assisting clients with their career decision making and the meanings that each of the themes hold for them in doing so. This not only will help further clarify the principles of change inherent in the therapeutic relationship as a vehicle for guiding clients' decision making, but also it has the potential to inspire clinicians' tacit and intuitive processes in the interest of developing these skills in order to model them for clients (see Anderson & Braud, 2011).

Chaos Theory of Careers

CTC is based on the premise that complexity, changeability, and connectedness are principal components of career development (Bright & Pryor, 2011; Pryor, 2010). Given that individuals often make decisions with incomplete knowledge (Pryor & Bright, 2009b), clinicians using the CTC model promote the ideas that (a) it is useful and vocationally mature to be both certain and uncertain when making a career

decision, (b) “too much order and stability is actually quite hazardous to adaptation” (Bussolari & Goodell, 2009, p. 105), (c) changing one’s mind after having made a choice is an adaptive trait for the future and not necessarily a sign of incompetence or stalling (Miller, 1995), and (d) complexity need not be feared but rather embraced with humility and openness to its inherent possibilities (Pryor, Amundson, & Bright, 2008).

Overview of Career Decision-Making Theory

Similar to recent writings that have drawn comparisons between chaos theory and psychoanalysis (Marshall, 2011) and life transition counseling (Bussolari & Goodell, 2009), CTC uses the language and premises of chaos theory as an allegory for career decision making:

- Fractals—a symbol for careers as complex adaptive entities that both represent and characterize the person (Bright & Pryor, 2011);
- Attractor patterns—portrayals of closed systems thinking (e.g., point, pendulum, and torus attractors) and of open systems thinking (e.g., strange attractor; Bloch, 2005; Bright & Pryor, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2003, 2009b, 2011).
- Phase transitions—the ability for open systems to self-organize fluidly and creatively in response to changes in environments and to seek patterns that will yield the greatest chances of survival (Bloch, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2003, 2011).
- The butterfly effect—a metaphor for the Zen notion that the more complex a system, the higher the potential for a small change to reverberate through the entire system and to cause major changes (Bloch, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2003).

The assumption that change occurs either very gradually or very quickly (i.e., a quantum leap in development), impacting a myriad of factors that influence careers (Pryor & Bright, 2011).

CTC interventions. CTC utilizes an analogical reasoning process called abduction (Pryor & Bright, 2009a). Clinicians explore clients’ career narratives and present feedback at critical junctures in the form of metaphors. This feedback is intended to help clients develop intuitive competence by identifying how ambiguity has been helpful in their previous decision making. It also helps clients balance realism with flexibility in their current and future situations by identifying and building upon their previous successes to clarify their work values, potentials, and limitations, to search for emerging trends in the work world that translate into career possibilities, to work toward a *definite maybe* choice, and to take action on that choice without becoming stagnant in the face of too many options (Bright & Pryor, 2011; Miller, 1995; Pryor, 2010).

Pryor and Bright (2006, 2011; Pryor et al., 2008) provided a host of techniques, card sorts, and story narratives that clinicians may use to inspire dialogue with

clients, to review and reframe clients' expectations about careers, and to encourage clients' developing open systems thinking. Brief illustrations of CTC interventions have been provided in case studies involving the utilization of CTC with adolescent populations (Borg, Bright, & Pryor, 2006; Shepard & Shoop, 2003) and with career-plateaued, middle-aged workers (Bloch, 2005; Duffy, 2000). Pryor and Bright (2008) compared CTC principles with archetypal themes inherent in career counseling narratives (e.g., overcoming the monster, rags to riches, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy, etc.) to help clients overcome fixation in habitual career schemas and to help clinicians build receptivity to clients' symbolic logic. Lippman (2012) applied CTC principles to his own vocation as a physician and teacher in an effort to inspire and impart the wisdom he developed during his career to novice professionals in his field. With this in mind, Shepard and Shoop (2003) emphasized the power of collective resonance and of vicarious learning in CTC's narrative approach—that is, when people hear and think creatively about the possibilities for others' lives, they are more likely to apply the process to their own.

Comparison with existential career decision making. Similar to existential career counseling, CTC uses a dialectic reflective process to assist clients with developing the skills of adaptation and resilience in the face of unemployment, burnout, transition, or career uncertainty. Moreover, both models focus less on maladaptive characteristics in clients' decision making and more on empowering individuals to establish connections with their past heritage in order to build present and future inspiration and strength in approaching their careers as a transformative process (Pryor & Bright, 2003). Furthermore, rather than utilizing prescriptive nuts-and-bolts techniques to promote individuals' fit into static work roles, both models encourage individuals to cultivate and balance tacit and intuitive ways of knowing with rational and sensory modes in order to navigate, appreciate, and participate in a complex universe as situations demand. Hence, each model promotes the notion of responsibility as one's *ability to respond*.

Transpersonal dimensions. However, in contrast to existential career counseling—which deals with overcoming the loss of familiar structures of the past and with acknowledging that “a choice means that hundreds of other possible options are also declined” (Maglio et al., 2005, p. 84)—CTC emphasizes that one choice lends itself to the possibility of even more choices by attuning oneself to chance events, to synchronicity, to serendipity, and to luck readiness, that is, being in the right place at the right time (Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005; Pryor, 2010). In this sense, CTC may be regarded as transpersonal career counseling (defined as dealing with spiritual issues “beyond, across, or through the personally identified aspects of self,” Anderson & Braud, 2011, p. 8). It encourages clients not only to search for work that provides an embodied experience of aliveness (as does existential) but *also* to surrender individual self-identity and self-importance in favor of developing a multitude of potentials (beyond a specific identified calling) and to establish an even greater sense of moral

responsibility by embracing interdependent connections with a life force/source beyond both themselves and their immediate surroundings.

Bloch (2005) emphasized careers not as static abstractions separate from the individual worker but rather as complex living entities: “Seeing one’s career as spiritual avoids the moral schizophrenia between life and work. It adds both an ethical dimension and a dimension of love to work” (Bloch, 2005, p. 202). CTC shares several characteristics in common with tenets of transpersonal psychology as described by Wilber (2000):

- Open systems—Sustainable careers maintain themselves through an ongoing flow and interchange of energy with surrounding networks—for example, education, occupations, global and local economies, technologies, community needs, cultures, and so on (Pryor & Bright, 2011).
- Interdependence—Participation in a give-and-take relationship with the external world; individuals are both dynamic (initiating and affected by change) and systemic (part of a complex array of other systems), developing and participating in networks of mutual internal and external influence (Pryor, 2010).
- Nonlinear dynamics—What reductionist science disregards as noise carries substantial weight in grasping the relationship between clients’ perceptions of order and of chaos (Pryor & Bright, 2011).
- Holonic—Like a nesting doll, each part is a whole network unto itself, consists of smaller networks, and participates in greater networks. Applied to work, career is approached as a living entity, an extension of oneself, and a resource unto itself—a foundation for shaping one’s future by applying sustainable principles established from life experience to novel situations (Pryor & Bright, 2011).

Existing Research Support and Suggestions for Future Research

Evidence supporting CTC theory in the context of mid-life career transition. Peake and McDowall (2012) utilized CTC as a guiding metaphor in their narrative analysis of participants’ reflections on qualities of previous career transitions, which lent themselves to successful transitions during mid-life. The authors reported four prominent common themes that support the central themes of CTC outlined above. First, none of the participants described having a clearly defined plan when they began their careers, most participants reported “a sense of drifting or going with the flow at some stage of their careers prior to a career transition” (Peake & McDowall, 2012, p. 401), and career advancement “appeared to occur in a haphazard, opportunistic, or reactive manner” (Peake & McDowall, 2012, p. 400). Second, growth from adversity (i.e., changing careers to overcome a sense of disappointment or disillusionment with one’s initially chosen career) was a distinctive feature for almost all

of the participants. Third, lucky breaks (being in the right place at the right time) yielded “disproportionate impacts on [participants’] subsequent career paths” (Peake & McDowall, 2012, p. 402). Fourth, participants’ narratives were marked by “a journey of self-discovery through career transition” (Peake & McDowall, 2012, p. 403) that resulted in “passion for [one’s] new vocation” (Peake & McDowall, 2012, p. 403).

The authors concluded that “linear, planned approaches are not necessary for job satisfaction and . . . are increasingly difficult to adopt in an era where change and uncertainty are becoming the norm” (Peake & McDowall, 2012, p. 405). Rather, “false starts are not fatal but can be an integral part of the overall career journey” (Peake & McDowall, 2012, p. 405), and a reflective interviewing style is more conducive to eliciting information about clients’ career experiences “that may not be obvious or salient in a more traditional career discussion” (Peake & McDowall, 2012, p. 406).

Further qualitative research could extend this empirical support of CTC theory into additional populations, including younger clientele. In addition, it could explore potential differences between clients’ attitudes about voluntary and involuntary career transitions and how CTC may be useful in helping clients manage each. Moreover, without remaining confined to *ex post facto* reflection, researchers could also explore how clients experience the process of facing career decisions in the immediate present and how these themes may be addressed by CTC’s process approach.

Evidence supporting CTC interventions in the context of university career counseling. McKay, Bright, and Pryor’s (2005) empirical study compared the immediate and the longitudinal effects of CTC with customary trait-based career counseling interventions among university students who presented for career counseling services. Results suggested that while both models had an immediate positive effect, CTC had a “longer lasting and longer-term impact” (McKay, Bright, & Pryor, 2005, p. 109). Participants in the CTC group reported greater degrees of satisfaction with the outcome (not just the content) of their career counseling experience after 1 month, whereas satisfaction scores declined after 1 month for the group who received trait-based interventions. Furthermore, participants in the CTC group demonstrated fewer irrational career thoughts and more sustained improvements on a measure of career decision-making self-efficacy after 1 month than participants in the trait-based group.

Because treatment allegiance effects could have impacted the outcome differences, additional research is recommended to replicate McKay et al.’s (2005) study. Future studies also could test the sustainability of CTC at even longer intervals (preferably 1 year and longer), and they could compare the immediate and long-term impacts of CTC and trait-based career counseling with a variety of other populations in both academic settings (e.g., high school students, nontraditional college students) and nonacademic settings (i.e., older adults who do not intend to complete additional training).

Conclusion

At the dawn of the job market shift that has come to characterize the current economy, career theorists suggested a shift from arbitrary information processing and social learning theories toward more reflective theory-in-action perspectives derived from actual performance (O'Hare, 1987) that account for complexity and that balance divergent and convergent thinking processes (Blustein, 2003). These theorists emphasized that for career counseling to remain relevant to and productive for its clientele, clinicians need to not only promote clients' taking an active role in the career decision-making process but also surrender passive reliance on prescriptive techniques and to become more active agents in facilitating this endeavor.

In this article, we discussed two holistic models that espouse such a reflective process of career decision making, we identified specific areas of research support for their utility, and we suggested areas of additional inquiry to further demonstrate their efficacy. Like emerging constructivist/narrative approaches (e.g., Savickas, 2012), the existential and CTC models emphasize a process of *emplotting* a seemingly disparate set of micronarratives into a cohesive story in the interest of deconstructing, reconstructing, and coconstructing clients' sense of career identities. However, the existential and CTC models go a step further by providing sets of philosophical principles that serve as motifs for guiding the counseling process.

Arguably, this lends itself to better culturally informed and culturally competent career counseling practice. Both approaches emphasize the importance of social influences and context for understanding clients' concerns about career decision making that transcend the expectations of and possible options within the dominant American culture. Likewise, they also consider the cultural meaning of these concerns within the unique perspective of the individual. Existential theory provides a framework for understanding how clients' cultural frameworks may legitimize one dialectical pole at the expense of the other (Hannush, 2007) in dealing with human dilemmas that transcend cultural relativism (Schneider & Krug, 2010) and how these values may both inspire and impede clients' career decision making. Meantime, "the CTC notion of attractors recursively influencing one another is a new way to understand and navigate the challenges of [cultural] diversity and globalization" (Pryor & Bright, 2011, p. 203).

Some (e.g., Gluck, 1997) have criticized reflective career decision-making models as introducing increased uncertainty into the lives of people who already experience stress. Although it is important to maintain empathetic sensitivity and to avoid counterproductively overwhelming clients, it also is important to avoid disempowering them. The illusory comforts and security that characterized the American Dream during the 20th century have proven unstable and continue to collapse in the current economy. To meet the demands of the times, the existential and CTC models of career decision making may inspire a sense of sustainable hope, resilience, and motivation in the face of rapid change by encouraging clients to seize the opportunities in crisis and the inherent potential in ambiguity in the here-and-now. As Bridges (1994) noted, "the old rules are gone, and the new rules aren't clear" (p. 193).

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