

Designing Effective Models of Career Service Delivery: Connecting Theory & Practice*

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Introduction

The phrases “theory to practice,” and variations of it (e.g., “putting theory and research to work”), are used quite often in the career services field. Conference presentations, textbooks, and speeches seek to illustrate how a particular career theory or approach is used in a real world setting. Unfortunately, the realities of practice and service delivery are often quite separate from the ideals or concepts espoused by some theorists, researchers, and other individuals in the fields of career development and vocational psychology. This author, over the last 5 years, has begun her presentations and workshops for career practitioners by asking them to write down on a piece of paper the theory or model that guides their work and career services interventions. An examination of these responses is often quite troubling. Often what is written simply reflects a particular technique or intervention, or a specific assessment instrument. This should be a reality check for those who engage in theory development, and who operate under the notion that career practitioners, employed in direct services positions, are actually using the most often cited theories to guide how they approach to designing and delivering career services.

My casual observation (but one developed from over 30 years in the career services field) is that those who write (and speak) about the relation of theory to practice are typically not “down in the trenches” in settings such as workforce/employment centers, youth centers, organization-based career centers, under-resourced secondary schools, or post-secondary career centers with both limited staffing and resources. Some career practitioners, maybe many, actually avoid career theory. Others lack formal training in career theory. Theoretical concepts can be difficult to comprehend, lack practical applications, are best suited to only one type of service delivery method (i.e., individual counseling), and/or the content of particular approaches seems disconnected from the daily challenges practitioners face in serving large numbers of individuals with diverse career concerns. When practitioners apply career theory in practice, they may pick a single technique, assessment, etc., rather than fully implementing a theory’s concepts.

A useful question to ask in evaluating career theories is: to what extent does this theory provide guidance for how career services are delivered? This leads me to describe how a career theory, concerned with cost-effective and efficient services, came to be applied to the design and delivery of career services in the setting where this author works and collaborates with both practitioners and researchers.

Long before there was a theory, staff members who were part of Florida State University's direct services unit titled--the Curricular-Career Information Service (CCIS) (now part of the larger Career Center, www.career.fsu.edu)--were concerned with how to serve, with limited resources, large numbers of students with varying needs who sought educational, career planning and employment assistance. The services approach used by the university counseling center at the time, resulted in appointment wait lists for individuals who primarily needed career information and a minimal level of assistance from a staff member, (not necessarily a one-on-one counseling appointment). Space does not permit a full accounting of how this approach evolved but readers can learn more in the chapter by Reardon (2004) where he discusses how he and other colleagues (Reardon & Domkowski, 1977; Reardon & Minor, 1975) devised a career services program that began with a vision of how a center, staffed with highly trained paraprofessionals and professionals, using an instructional systems approach, could more efficiently meet the needs of students and community individuals seeking career information and services. This early model, that incorporated instructional modules, self-assessments, information resources (Reardon, 1984), and differentiated levels of service delivery, was to have a lasting impact on the field (Reardon, 1996; 2004). It was in this environment that the early work on cognitive information processing theory (CIP) theory, and its application to career counseling and services, was initiated by Peterson, Sampson, and Reardon (1991).

Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) Theory Applied To Career Counseling & Services

The developers of the CIP approach have long been concerned with how best to serve clients' career needs, when there are limited staff resources and many individuals seeking assistance. "The aims of the CIP approach are to help persons make an appropriate current career choice and, while doing so, to learn improved problem-solving and decision-making skills that they will need for future choices" (Sampson, Peterson, Reardon, & Lenz, 2004, p. 2). As

Sampson (2009) noted: “the career theory that influences the design of career guidance interventions has a substantial influence on the effectiveness and cost of service delivery, and the cost of career guidance interventions strongly influences the access that persons have to the services they need” (p. 1).

CIP’s two core constructs are the pyramid of information processing domains (i.e., the **content** of career problem solving and decision making) and the CASVE cycle (i.e., the **process** of career problem solving and decision making) (Sampson et al. 2004). A simple way to think about this in relation to career decision making is **what do individuals know** (about themselves, about options, their life situation, etc.) and **what are they going to do about it** (are they ready to make a decision or take action, yes or no? if not, why not?).

Some theorists and authors have minimized the notion of making or committing to an occupational, educational, or employment choice, and have suggested it is not prudent in today’s changing economy. The reality is that most individuals, regardless of age or life stage, continually face choices they must make (even if the options are severely restricted, e.g., to pursue further schooling or not, to work in a low paying services job, or seek a higher paid position in a manufacturing operation, or not work at all!), and they often must make these choices with limited or incomplete information, and in the context of a multitude of factors that have shaped the person’s life path to that point. More than 30 years ago, Holland (1976) reflected this point of view when he noted: “my impression is that consumers of vocational counseling want most of all to arrive at or confirm one or more vocational alternatives they can feel good about” (p. 13). The CIP approach deals with not only the decision “at hand” that a client might be facing, but as noted earlier, is also concerned with helping clients learn strategies for career problem solving and decision making they can effectively use throughout the lifespan, thus enabling them to deal with unexpected and unplanned life events they may encounter. Further, in addition to emphasizing the importance of self-knowledge, e.g., interests, values, skills, the CIP approach allows for diverse ways of learning about one’s self, that accommodates both structured and unstructured assessment techniques (Peterson, et al., 1991).

Along with the two core concepts mentioned above, CIP theory includes strategies for “readiness assessment, intervention planning, career assessment, information use, counseling, and career resource room design” (Sampson et al., 2004, p. 2). Two key aspects of readiness assessment include an individual’s **capability** to make a choice and the **complexity** of his or her life situation, which takes into consideration contextual variables such as family, culture, discrimination, organizational work environments, and labor market factors. Consideration of a client’s capability and complexity determine whether an individual is directly connected to the level of services provided. In CIP theory these include: self-help, brief staff-assisted, and individual case-managed services (Sampson, 2008; Sampson et al., 2004). To learn more about these topics and other key elements of CIP theory applied to practice, visit:

http://www.career.fsu.edu/techcenter/designing_career_services/index.html. In addition, the CIP bibliography (available at:

http://www.career.fsu.edu/techcenter/designing_career_services/cip_bibliographies/index.html includes examples of how CIP theory and a related readiness assessment instrument and workbook, the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI-Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996a) and Career Thoughts Inventory workbook (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996b), are used to help individuals improve their readiness for career choice by identifying, challenging, and altering negative career thoughts that make decision making more difficult. The CTI and the accompanying workbook have been used with various populations ranging from secondary and post-secondary students, persons with disabilities, adults, immigrants, and other diverse groups. The CTI has been adapted for use in other countries, including China, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Greece, Korea, and Scotland.

In addition to considering service delivery levels that involve one-on-one approaches, it is also useful to consider how career theory might guide services that are delivered in a curricular or instructional format. This is discussed in the next section.

CIP in Curricular Interventions

One of the hallmarks of CIP theory is that it can be easily applied in a variety of service delivery formats including curricular interventions. Beginning in 2000, the 3-credit career development class offered at Florida State University, was given a “make over” and was re-conceptualized using CIP theory as its guiding framework. The course text, *Career Development*

and Planning: A Comprehensive Approach (Reardon, Lenz, Sampson, & Peterson, 2009), uses the CIP framework to organize the content of 15 chapters, divided into three sections that include (1) career concepts and applications, (2) social conditions affecting career development, and (3) implementing a strategic career plan. The goal of the course, in keeping with CIP theory, is for students to not simply focus on a one-time choice, such as selecting a major, training program, occupation or job, but rather to learn an approach for solving career problems and making career decisions that can be used for future choices. In addition, by completing the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI), and receiving both a group and individual interpretation of the instrument, students learn the impact of negative thinking, and how by identifying, challenging, and altering their negative career thoughts, they can increase the likelihood that they will be able to successfully navigate the career problem solving and decision-making process. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of the course in reducing negative career thoughts (Reed, Reardon, Lenz, & Leierer, 2001). For information on the class and its integration of CIP theory, visit: <http://www.career.fsu.edu/courses/sds3340/>.

Applying CIP in Program Applications

The labor market changes that have characterized our global economy have fueled efforts by some nations to expand the reach of their career services and programs to populations within their country who are underserved, e.g., at-risk youth, immigrants, under or unemployed adults. In other countries, the focus has been on creating career and employment services where none previously existed. Blustein (2006) has written extensively, and with passion, about the need for vocational psychology to expand its role and consider those clients not served by traditional theories, models, and career counseling interventions. Dr. James Sampson, one of the developers of the CIP approach, has been a key leader in illustrating how CIP principles and concepts can be used on a national level as a framework for improving the delivery of career services (Sampson, 2008). His work in England (Sampson, Watts, Palmer, & Hughes, 2000), Scotland, and Northern Ireland, provides examples of how CIP can be applied in designing and implementing career services in school, university, and community-based settings. His efforts in implementing CIP in a programmatic manner, both in the U.S. and abroad, are further elaborated in a handbook, published by the National Career Development Association, entitled: *Designing and Implementing Career Programs: A Handbook for Effective Practice* (Sampson, 2008).

Powerpoint presentations for this handbook can be found at:

<http://www.career.fsu.edu/techcenter/CIPpowerpoints.html>. In addition, Lenz, Reardon, Peterson, and Sampson (2001) and Reardon (2004) have described how CIP theory can be used in career development program design. Finally, it is instructive to note that professionals from more than 40 countries have visited the Florida State University Career Center to observe the application and implementation of CIP theory in a career services setting, in order to better understand how it might be applied in their settings or with a particular population. While the author of this paper is admittedly biased, she is aware of no other university-based, comprehensive career services setting that attracts visitors for the specific purpose of observing how career theory is applied to designing and delivering career services.

Closing

In applying CIP theory to career counseling and services, we have sought to keep the notion of effectively and efficiently serving clients at the forefront of our efforts, while also maintaining a program of research to extend CIP's knowledge base and its constructs. Increasing awareness of the CIP approach can be seen in the professional career development literature, e.g., Brown (2002), Niles and Bowsbey (2005), Sharf (2005), and Zunker (2006; 2008). Zunker noted that CIP theory is "user friendly and is one of the few that offers a counseling model that incorporates theoretical concepts" (p. 25). Niles and Bowsbey (2005) in their review of CIP theory noted that "the fact that the CIP research team built their theory upon a solid foundation of research in cognitive psychology, have developed clear definitions of the different dimensions of the theory, and are committed to translating theory into practice suggests a bright future for the CIP approach to career development interventions" (p. 97). For further information and resources on the use of the cognitive information processing (CIP) approach in solving career problems and designing career services, visit:

http://www.career.fsu.edu/techcenter/designing_career_services/index.html.

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