CHILDREN'S CAREER DEVELOPMENT: A METATHEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Career development is regarded as a lifespan process; however, the career development of children has received little theoretical and research attention. This article reflects on the breadth and depth of understandings about children's career development from the metatheoretical perspective of the Systems Theory Framework of career development (Patton & McMahon, 1999). The relationship between career development literature and career practice for children is discussed.

Recent conceptualisations of career development reflect a lifespan approach (Patton & McMahon, 1999; Super, 1990). However, there is a lack of emphasis in career theory and research on the span of life when individuals are children. Given the disparate nature of the career literature, an holistic structure is needed in order to examine the breadth and depth of understandings of children's career development and its possible relationship to practice. Such a structure is provided by the metatheoretical Systems Theory Framework (STF) of career development (Patton & McMahon, 1999).

THE SYSTEMS THEORY FRAMEWORK OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The STF (Patton & McMahon, 1999) presented the first, and currently the only, unifying metatheoretical framework within which to locate and use extant theories on career development. As an overarching framework focusing on all parts as well as the whole, new or revised theoretical devel-opments may be accommodated along with existing theories. The STF provides the breadth necessary to unite career theories, while individual career theories provide the depth needed to account for specific concepts.

The STF provides a framework of influences on career development. The notion of influence represents a dynamic term under which the *content* and *process* of career development may be examined. Central to the STF is a circle representing the individual. Contained within the circle is a range of intrapersonal content influences traditionally represented in career theory, such as age, personality, gender and ethnicity. Further content influences are illustrated in the STF by the contextual system within which the individual lives. For example, social influences such as family, friends, school and peers are illustrated. At an even broader level, environmental/societal influences such as geographical location, socio-economic circumstances and the political climate are represented. Thus, the STF contains three interconnected systems of content influences: the individual system, the social system and the environmental system.

A strength of the STF is its recognition of the influence of the process within and between these systems. Process influences reflect the dynamic nature of career development. Recursiveness, the interaction within individuals and between individuals and their environments, is the first of these process influences. Recursiveness is also reflected in the second of the process influences—change over time, which accounts for the micro-process of decision making and the macro-process of lifespan development. The third of the process influences is chance, the unpredicted events that may determine career development.

The dynamic nature of the STF allows for the dual role of influences as both content and process. For example, while core constructs in career development theory such as self-concept and self-efficacy may initially be viewed as intrapersonal content influences, their development over time and their recursive interaction with other influences enables them to be also viewed as process influences. In essence, these developmental concepts are influenced by experience, and they in turn influence experience. Thus, for the purpose of this article, these core constructs will be termed recursive influences. Content, process and recursive influences will guide this metatheoretical perspective of children's career development. Thereafter, the relationship between career literature and practice will be discussed. An article of this length does not permit detailed examination of the career literature related to children. Rather a perspective is provided that is informed by previous extensive reviews of career theory (Patton & McMahon, 1999) and research of children (Watson & McMahon, 2004).

A Metatheoretical Perspective

Content Influences

Several career theories draw attention to the content of career development, but few relate content specifically to the career development of children. Further, most theories focus on intrapersonal and social influences on children's career development. Age and gender are the predominant intrapersonal influences described in the literature (see Gottfredson, 2002; Super, 1990). Social influences such as family and school are mentioned in several theories (e.g., Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996; Roe, 1957; Super, 1990). For example, Roe focused on the nature of the relationship between parent and child, and how the child's needs are met; claiming that childhood environments may be predictors of person- or non-person-oriented occupations. Similarly, Bordin (1990) acknowledged the level of parental support and nurturance as being influential on the vocational identity development of children.

Some career theories acknowledge the environmental/societal influences of socio-economic status on opportunities and social interaction in career development (e.g., Brown, 2002), but few do so in relation to children. Socio-economic status along with other environmental/societal influences—such as the labour market, social policy and the impact of technology—are also considered as career development influences in a number of more holistic career theories (Patton & McMahon, 1999; Super, 1990), but again none specifically address these influences in relation to children.

In essence, the relevance of content influences to children's career development is more implied than described in the literature. The nature of this relevance remains uncertain, with more attention focused on intrapersonal and social influences than on environmental/societal influences. Further, within these broad categories, knowledge of specific influences is differentially understood.

Process Influences

Process influences in career development theory also remain lacking in detail as process is described broadly in terms of the interaction between children and their environment or the stages through which children pass. For instance, fantasy, play and learning experiences are described as processes that enable children to develop concepts of themselves in adult roles (e.g., Bordin, 1990; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996; Super, 1990).

However, other authors are less specific about describing the application to the career development of children when discussing the influence of the processes. Holland (1997) describes a process whereby individuals develop preferences for certain activities as a result of their interaction with 'cultural and personal forces including peers, biological heredity, parents, social class, culture and the physical environment' (p. 2), with these preferences becoming interests in which individuals develop competencies. Similarly, theorists such as Lent, Brown and Hackett (2002) describe the career development process as an interaction with the environment. For example, they describe a process of learning through personal performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological and affective states.

A number of theorists (Ginzberg, 1984; Gottfredson, 2002; Super, 1990) describe a more specific process of career development: a sequence of stages beginning in childhood. In general, these stages are consistent with four major tasks of vocational development that Savickas (2002) believes are imposed on children by society: recognising a future work role; increasing personal control over vocational activities; forming conceptions about making educational and vocational choices; and gaining the confidence to implement these choices. For example, Super describes a growth stage when a child develops concepts of himself in an adult role through fantasy and play. During this stage, children attend school, develop work habits and become more future-oriented.

Gottfredson's (2002) theory of circumscription and compromise presents a theory of four stages that begins in early childhood and ends in late adolescence. The first three stages of her model are particularly relevant to children. Children from the ages of three

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to five orientate to size and power and recognise that working is a part of the adult world. As children's ability to think in concrete terms and make simple distinctions develops, they begin to orientate to sex roles and actively reject cross-sex behaviour between the ages of six and eight. Increasingly, children develop an awareness of distinctions in social class as they move into the third stage, where they orientate to social valuation between the ages of nine and 13. During this stage, children become more aware of the connection between employment and income, and begin to identify what they perceive as lower- and higher-status occupations. Corresponding with this, they become aware of the concrete representations of social class including clothing and possessions.

As with content influences, process influences are variably described in the career literature. However, the stage theories do provide a more substantive description of the nature of process influences.

Recursive Influences

While the predominant focus of the previous sections is on content or process influences, some influences

more clearly illustrate the recursive nature of the metatheoretical framework used in this article. These influences are essentially related to developmental concepts such as self. The importance of self is acknowledged by Super (1992), who describes the development of self-concept as a 'product of the person and the environment' (p. 42). Self-concept is moulded over time through social learning as individuals interact with their environments, with a desired outcome in individuals' career development identified as career maturity—that is, the readiness to make effective career choices. Centred around the formation of self-concept, Gottfredson's (2002) theory differs from others in that it focuses on the development of the *social self* rather than the *psychological self*. Gottfredson draws attention to the social aspects of self, such as gender, social class and intelligence, rather than the more psychological aspects of self, such as personality and values.

In a similar way, self-efficacy beliefs (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002) and values (Brown, 2002) are shaped through interaction with environmental influences, such as cultural background, gender, and socio-economic status, all of which influence opportunity and social interaction. The recursiveness of these influences is reflected in the way they shape and are shaped by interaction with the environment.

Recursiveness is a core element that emphasises the dynamic nature of career development and is recognised in several key concepts in the career literature. The nature of recursiveness is acknowledged in the literature, but the process by which it occurs is not sufficiently explained. While there is widespread acceptance of the notion of career development as a dynamic process, most of the influences represented in the metatheoretical framework have not been represented in the literature in such a dynamic way.

As discussed earlier, the metatheoretical perspective of the STF (Patton & McMahon, 1999) illustrates the breadth of career development. Individual career theories should demonstrate the depth needed to understand career development. However, as evidenced in children's career development literature, a depth of understanding is lacking in the career literature. Thus, at a broad level the dynamic nature of children's career development is understood, but in-depth accounts of this dynamic nature have not been fully described. Further, while depth of under-standing is evident in some career literature, it is not evident across the literature generally.

CAREER LITERATURE AND PRACTICE: A RELATIONSHIP

Within the relationship between career literature and practice, breadth and depth need to be discussed. The breadth of the metatheoretical perspective adopted in this article is reflected in recent national frameworks developed by the USA (National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (US), 1996), Canada (Hache, Redekopp, & Jarvis, 2000) and Australia (Miles Morgan Australia, 2003) to guide career practice across the lifespan. While the metatheoretical perspective may be reflected in both career literature and practice, the lack of direct links between career literature and practice limit the depth of our understanding.

For example, in recent years there has been criticism of a schism between career theory, research and practice (Savickas & Walsh, 1996). Nowhere is this more evident than in the career development of children. The holistic, lifespan perspective of career development theory (Patton & McMahon, 1999; Super, 1990) that emphasises the content and lifespan process of career development is not reflected in children's career research in two important ways. First, the career development of children as a significant stage in the lifespan process is under-researched, and, second, most research on children's career development has been skewed towards content influences such as occupational aspirations, age and gender (Watson & McMahon, 2004).

Further, there is insufficient validation of career theory in the area of the career development of children (Tracey, 2001; Watson & McMahon, 2004). Thus, while influential career theories such as those of Holland (1997) and Super (1990) have stimulated an extensive body of research in the career development of adults, no similar body of research exists in the area of the career development of children. Consequently, the applicability of these theories to the career development of children and to career practice remains uncertain.

The metatheoretical perspective of this article echoes the call by Gysbers (1996) for a comprehensive, cohesive approach to career literature and practice. Greater understanding of the career development of

children may provide greater insight into the career development of adults, enhance career practice, and enable greater and more informed facilitation of the career development of children. While the breadth of the metatheoretical perspective allows us to understand children's career literature and practice more holistically, it also reveals a lack of depth in that same literature and practice. Clearly, there is much to be done in order to realise a more in-depth understanding of the career development of children.

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THEORY AND PRACTICE

This section is designed as a brief professional review of the article. It provides relevant study questions and answers for readers to test their knowledge of the article.

What is the purpose of taking a metatheoretical perspective in order to understand children's career development?

Answer: Given the disparate nature of the career literature, an holistic structure is needed in order to examine children's career theory, research and their possible relationship with practice. A metatheoretical perspective helps us to differentiate between the breadth and the depth of understandings of the career development of children. A metatheoretical perspective enables us to reflect on the breadth. However, depth should be provided by individual career theories and this is lacking as there have been few theories directly or specifically applied to children.