Constructive Development and Career Transition: Implications for Counseling

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The ability to effectively manage career transitions may be related to an individual's meaning-making framework or constructive development. The implications of constructive developmental theory for career choice and implementation are explored. The interplay between career transition and developmental transformation is examined, and counseling strategies for assisting such transformation are proposed. Case illustrations are offered.

Theory and practice in career development have been increasingly characterized in recent decades as a lifelong series of choices that individuals make to express their changing needs (e.g., Super, 1984). This dynamic understanding of career has replaced the static conception that had been a legacy of the trait-factor-dominated counseling approach (Isaacs, 1985). Although there have been attempts to describe normative phases in career (e.g., Greenhaus, 1987; Schein, 1978; Super, 1957), explanations of the cognitive readiness that enables individuals to successfully address ongoing career transition at each career phase have been few.

Emerging neo-Piagetian cognitive theories of adult development (e.g., Kegan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1981; Perry, 1970) have explained such processes under the rubrics of "knowledge structures" or "meaning-making balances," which frame individuals' approaches to problem solving. It is the purpose of this article to explore the career counseling implications of one cognitive developmental theory in particular, namely the constructive developmental theory of Robert Kegan (1982). From this perspective, an individual's meaning-making framework, or constructive developmental stage, contributes significantly to his or her adaptiveness when faced with career challenges.

Meaning Construction and Career Development

In psychological terms, career can be considered to be an act of meaning construction. Carlson (1988) cited Stade Terekel's (1974) conclusion from extensive interviews of workers that "[Work] is about a search... for daily meaning as well as daily bread" (p. xiii). In a more theoretical vein, Super (1981) described the centrality of meaning making in career development when he proposed that the "cement" that holds career development theory together is self-concept theory, which treats "the individual as the socialized organizer of his or her experience" (p. 185). Super's conception of the organism as an "organizer" (Kegan, 1982) parallels the fundamental assumption of constructivist theory, in which "the mind... is an active, constructive system" (Guidano & Lioi, 1985, p. 103). It is a conception that treats mental constructs as "feed-forward" mechanisms (Weimer, 1977), ones that precede experience. The nature and utility of the various meaning-making structures through which individuals create experience and how they change are the major objects of study from the constructivist perspective.

Central to meaning construction are the Piagetian (1970) notions of assimilation and accommodation. As Peterson, Sampson, and Reardon (1991) described it, "An individual first tries to incorporate new experiences into existing cognitive frameworks (assimilation), but then must modify and enrich structures to meet the new input demand (accommodation), and then reach a new balance with the environment (equilibration)" (p. 101). Career adaptation frequently requires accommodative activity in the redefinition of one's purposes and in decisions on the basis of the forms those purposes will take. Those cognitive structures that are more complex and inclusive provide the individual with greater flexibility in adapting to internal and external career-related changes.

Constructive Development

This cognitive-constructivist framework has been further elaborated into developmental terms that describe a progression of meaning-making structures in the direction of greater complexity, relativism, and internality (Kurfs, 1983). Many so-called neo-Piagetian cognitive developmental theorists (e.g., Bass, 1984; Kegan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1981; Perry, 1970) have used the essential Piagetian paradigm to describe adult psychological growth (or development) as an individual's increasing ability to incorporate new experiences into her or his awareness, that is, to accommodate to new experiences.

Kegan's (1982) constructive developmental theory is perhaps the most inclusive of the cognitive-developmental theories, explaining how the self construct meaning across the affective, cognitive, and moral domains (Epstein, 1983). Kegan (1982) described development as a function of the "process of evolution as a meaning-constitutive activity" (p. 42). As individuals move through what are variously called "stages" or "balances in subject-object relations," they achieve increasingly more expansive, open, inclusive understandings of themselves and the world. In Kegan's (1982) terms, constructive development is a succession of qualitative differentiations of the self from the world, with a qualitatively more extensive object with which to be in relation each time... successive triumphs of 'relationship to' rather than 'embeddedness in'... (p. 77). Kegan (1982) suggested that there are three such structures, or 'balances'... that characterize most adults' meaning construction. It should be noted, however, that most individuals' meaning making is not likely to be fully characterized by one balance, but rather to have characteristics of two balances, with one predominating. This suggestion is consistent with recent findings (e.g., Fischer & Silvam, 1985) that individuals do not simply use the set of assumptions from one cognitive stage, but rather show developmental characteristics from more than one stage, depending on context and other conditions (King, 1990). Following is a brief sketch of these balances.
The Interpersonal Balance

The first, the Interpersonal Balance, is typical of most adolescents and some adults. It loosely parallels Kohlberg's (1981) early Conventional stage, but is broader in its application to a variety of domains. Individuals who make meaning from the Interpersonal perspective are embedded in their relationships with others; they cannot generate a perspective outside of the relationships they live in. As such, the Interpersonally embedded individual is "pieced out" to his or her reference groups—peers, parents, and political and religious groups. In the Interpersonal Balance, it might be said that "I am my relationships" rather than "I have relationships." In the Interpersonal Balance there is no center in oneself from which one can author a theory of "how things should be." Rather than being on an authentic quest to express who he or she is, the person in the Interpersonal Balance is looking for the path of least resistance—the one that has been well trod or recommended, perhaps by his or her family, peers, or others. The Interpersonal self is not individuated sufficiently to have a coherent identity.

Although basic research on this relatively new theory is still underway, two studies found between 45% (Bar-Yam, 1991) and 53% (McAuliffe & Neugrt, 1992) of individuals older than 21 years of age to make meaning largely from the Interpersonal Balance. It follows that many of these individuals would make career choices based on unquestioned assumptions about the appropriate fields and roles for someone in their reference group, whether family, ethnic, class, or religious group. The blind allegiance of the Interpersonal Balance can have unfortunate consequences. For example, a 20-year-old junior insisted to her adviser that she enroll in a demanding mathematics education curriculum, despite a seeming lack of aptitude in math, because many of her sorority sisters had chosen that major. One year later, after she was placed on academic probation, she was helped by her adviser to act on her own voice, which called her to special education. Such is the power and the danger of operating within the Interpersonal Balance.

The Institutional Self

As can be seen from the aforementioned example, the limits of the Interpersonal Balance are reached if the environment challenges the individual to generate a point of view. For many, college provides such an environment, one in which the conflicting voices of professors, peers, parents, and others become a cacophony. The only way out of such a condition is to find a center in oneself, a place where the self can be first discovered, and then expressed, through opinions, ideologies, and, most important for our purposes, career goals. In Bar-Yam's (1991) study, about 40% of her sample of adults were capable of the self-authoring that characterizes the Institutional Balance. The Institutional self's strength lies in individuals' abilities to identify their purposes, to independently articulate a position, to run themselves as a somewhat fixed institution. The individual in the Institutional Balance will typically pursue career single-mindedly, intent on being a force to be reckoned with. This self-authored voice allows one to speak from one's own center, to discover new and old needs, values, and interests, and ultimately to act in a relatively autonomous fashion. As an undergraduate music major was heard to say, "I used to try to be whatever I thought was the 'right way' to be—which was what my family had communicated. That cut me off from the creative, expressive me, which I am now letting out!" The refrain of the Institutional Balance might be, "You can't please everyone, so you've got to please yourself."

The independent, self-assertive mode of the Institutional Balance is both a triumph over the stifling externality of Interpersonalism as well as the seeds of its limitations; for in the Institutional Balance the individual "lack[s] the capacity for self-correction, for reflecting on the fundamental purposes" (Kegan, 1982, p. 204) of the forms (e.g., job, occupation, other life role, or political or religious affiliation) that express those purposes. From the Institutional perspective, "I am my occupation" rather than "I have an occupation." This identification of self with the forms it is currently expressing limits the person to "making the continued maintenance of the organization the very goal of the organization, self-preservation having become an end in itself" (Kegan, 1982, p. 204). In the Institutional Balance, the authentic career quest (Homan, 1986) can be stymied by the individual's rigidity, by his or her being closed to new information. This embeddedness in the particular life role, or the form one has taken, does not allow for self-correction, for understanding that current forms are subsumed to the larger purposes (e.g., principles, values) of which they are merely a current expression.

This blindness to one's larger potentials can result in career distress until a more flexible balance is achieved. For example, Ken, who saw me for counseling, had single-mindedly, in an Institutional fashion, pursued a management career for which he was poorly suited. He had been let go twice for being ineffective at leading departments. He continued his pursuit, however, because, in his words, "I've always wanted the prestige and power associated with top management; it's who I am." In his Institutional embeddedness, he was thoroughly identified with the form (the management role) rather than with larger purposes that had been hidden by the blind adherence to a questionable goal. Through counseling, this man was able to reflect on his larger values, which included contributing to society, and to recognize his actual abilities, which lay in the mathematics and technical fields. His personal revolution resulted in successful entry into a community college teaching job, and in addition, a broader perspective for the future on his evolving self and the many forms that he might inhabit.

The Interindividual Balance

As the case of Ken illustrates, development beyond the Institutional Balance can be described as movement in which the self no longer is its particular form but instead has forms "like figures upon a ground, a moving ground more committed to culturing a process than preserving a product" (Kegan, 1982, p. 204). The Interindividual Balance is characterized by openness to new information, information that may challenge the form (e.g., occupation) that one may have currently taken. In this Interindividual Balance, any predetermined orientation to conflict and information is transcended, allowing the individual to hear dissonant voices, to actually invite contradiction, as opposed to preserving its own coherence at all cost.

Echoing the Interindividual Balance, Basseches (1984) proposed that "diachetical thinking," or thinking that is characterized by openness to contradiction and flexible movement through particular forms, is a major asset in negotiating life choices and transitions, because it gives individuals the greatest number of options for responding to their internal needs and to the external environment. In Kegan's terms, the Interindividual Balance similarly allows individuals to be self-transforming, open to new expressions of their yearnings, and responsive to internal and external reports on their performance, their likes, their impact on others, and their changing needs. It is this flexibility that makes the Interindividual Balance so appealing as a framework from which to manage career transition. The Interindividual Balance may be especially advantageous for negotiating adult redimensions of self, as in midlife and beyond, because of its reflectiveness, the welcoming of contradictions, and acceptance of incompleteness. Fortunately, Ken was helped to question the necessity, first, of his being in management and,
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For example, our aforementioned administrator experienced both transition, in his occupational change from management to teaching, and transformation, which is exemplified in his statement "I always thought it was necessary to be certain and committed, even single-minded, in my ambitions. In the process I ignored my own doubts, couldn't hear others' voices, and left out significant dimensions of myself." Counselors can help with either or both, if they are able first to assess a client's constructive development and second to provide a challenging yet supportive environment for change.

Assessing Constructive Development

Assessment of the client's meaning-making system, or developmental level, is a task of the early phase of constructive developmentally oriented career counseling. The goal of such assessment is to determine whether constructive transformation (movement across forms) or, alternatively, surface adjustments within a particular constructive developmental stage will be addressed. It should be noted, however, that seemingly surface change can also be an opportunity for constructive development. As the developmentally alert counselor establishes a relationship with the client, he or she can assess the individual's current balance from informal interview data or by means of the Subject-Object Interview (Lahey, Soubaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1983). Questions such as "What might be the cost to you of changing fields?" or "How do you know that this is the right decision for you?" evoke constructive developmental information. Such clues as reliance on outside sources for approval (the Interpersonal) or a singular, closed pursuit of a career goal (the Institutional) may indicate the current dominant meaning-making framework.

Defining the Counseling Objective

There may be cases in which simple transition from one occupational role to another seems most appropriate. If during initial assessment the client's current meaning-making balance seems to generally be adequate, then movement-within forms (Bashees, 1984) might be called for. For example, if the 20-year old seems to recognize and act on her own needs (a quality of the Institutional Balance) or if the potential midlife career changer reveals a flexible definition of self (an element of the Interindividual Balance), occupational change can be the focus of counseling. Such transition might be effected with a combination of reflective clarification, information giving, encouragement, and use of a rational decision-making strategy alone.

In contrast, when the meaning-making system seems to be inadequate to the transition task, the counselor can help the individual to discover "what she doesn't know she doesn't know" (Kegan, 1991) to help the person to have powerful learning experiences that are transforming, to change not just what is known but also how he or she knows. Frequently, clients come to counselors with stirrings of personal revolutions and sometimes ideas of how transformation might occur, however inarticulate these may be. In such cases, it is the counselor's challenge to assist clients in their transformations of meaning making. When the major assumptions that have guided a person's self-definition and way of knowing the world are being challenged, the career counselor is an educator in the truest sense: one who leads the client out of his or her established fortresses of mind, one who helps the client see that the seemingly anomalous phenomenon (e.g., of declining interest in an aspect of one's work) is an entry into a new way of thinking about oneself and about how career is defined. When transformation is called for, when the lens the person is using to respond to environmental demands is inadequate, the career counselor's job is more than that of

COUNSELING FOR TRANSITION AND TRANSFORMATION

Counseling strategies based on a constructive-developmental perspective will depend on the nature of the change that is called for. Not all transition is cause for constructive transformation. Distinctions have recently been made between first- and second-order change (Lydond, 1990), surface and deep structure (Arnkoff, 1980), movement-within and movement-through forms (Basseches, 1984), and peripheral beliefs and core self-beliefs (Borders & Archadel, 1987). The first term in each pair refers to change that does not alter the structure of the knowing system itself. If the transition triggers a deconstruction of a current way of knowing and reconstruction of what was formerly subject (i.e., the tacit assumptions that the person uses to make sense of the experience) into what now becomes object, however, then constructive transformation can be said to occur. A career dilemma may trigger simple transition, such as a job change, or personal transformation, that is, a substantial shift in the very definition of one's self.
a simple information giver whose aim might be to help the individual to accumulate a greater storehouse of knowledge about self and the world. In many cases both transition and transformation can be blended, as the counselor and client set tentative goals of both rethinking the client’s usual way of making meaning (for transformation) while also exploring information about the self and about occupations (for transition).

Confirming and Contradicting

From the constructive developmental perspective, then, the task of the helper might be construed as one of assisting clients’ self-construction of either new surface or deep meanings in the context of a safe, caring, yet challenging relationship. To achieve this, the counselor can provide two general conditions that encourage development. They have been variously called “support” and “challenge” (Sandford, 1960), “confirmation” and “contradiction” (Kegan, 1982), and in Kegan’s adaptation of Winnicott (1965), the “holding” and “letting go” environments. In Kegan’s (1982) terms, the counseling environment that “cultures” development is one in which confirmation (or support) of the client in his or her current meaning-making balance is combined with contradiction (or challenge) so that the adequacy of that framework to explain experience is called into question. Throughout the process, the counselor continues to blend holding the client with letting go. Challenge for the Interpersonally embedded 20-year-old might simply begin with “What are the implications of your newly discovered interest in theater, which you have said runs counter to your parents’ expectations?” Support might consist simply of recognizing the client’s predicament emphatically.

A Framework for Transition and Transformation

The counselor might use Loder’s (1989) framework of five “moments” in personal transformation as a guide for simple change or for the reconstruction of meaning. In Loder’s model, the counselor would encourage the client to experience these five transforming moments: (1) Conscious Conflict, or facing dissatisfactions and dilemmas squarely, (2) Pause, or giving time and energy to the implications of the conflict, (3) Image, or vividly experiencing the implications of the conflict in a new or renewed commitment, (4) Repatterning, or fleshing out the image, and (5) Interpretation, or acting on the decision. The focus in Loder’s model on conflict holding is consistent with the disconnection that Piaget (1970) suggested is central to developmental change. Illustrations of constructive-developmental career counseling in two adult stages follow.

Transformation From the Interpersonal Balance

In the Interpersonal Balance, the counselor’s challenge would take the form of asking relationship-embodied clients to make their own new career meanings. Activities that promote movement from the Interpersonal to the Institutional Balance would be characterized by the counselor’s challenging the client to discover and act on information about the self. Such discovery might be triggered by various self-exploration activities, in which the client is asked to generate and consider the implications of his or her abilities, interests, and values. Contradictions between such self-assessed needs and current activities can be highlighted. In these ways, stage-embedded assumptions about who is in charge of career might thus be challenged.

For example, for the young adult college student whose seemingly simple dilemma is to choose between pursuing a parent-approved pre-medical track or to consider the internal voice that draws her to the social sciences, counseling would operate on two levels: one to weigh the pros and cons of various fields of study and the other to support and challenge the person so that the tacit assumptions about “who’s in charge” become conscious, so that the dissident voice that implicitly calls the person to author his or her own career can be considered. A counselor who focuses singly on the psychosocial phase issues in this case, as in Levinson’s (1978) “Young Adult Transition” or Super’s (1957) “Exploratory” phase, might only emphasize the trying-on of occupations and the seeking of information. If the client were left with essentially an other-derived source of meaning, a rich opportunity to assist epistemological transformation would have been missed, a change that, in the cognitive developmental tradition, would lead to a more adaptive stance for future transitions.

Transformation From the Institutional Balance

Most adults move out of an exploratory mode and make major career commitments at some point. In psychosocial terms, adults enter “Establishment” and “Maintenance” career phases (Super, 1957). Recent revisions of career phase theory (e.g., Greenhaus, 1987; Levinson, 1978) point to a so-called midcareer reappraisal phenomenon, where issues of boredom, obsolescence, and involuntary career change arise to challenge the person to make new career meanings. Kegan (1991) has suggested that there is epistemology in this so-called “Mid-Life Transition.” Institutional meaning making, once a triumph for many in young adulthood, can be a deficit at midcareer phase.

The challenge of adult career reappraisal can, under favorable conditions, trigger development in the direction of an Interindividual perspective. In contrast with the previous example, in which the Interpersonally embedded, outer-directed individual was helped to find and act on a stable career in herself, the overly individuated Institutionally Balanced person might be assisted to embrace newness and contradiction while still making commitments. From this more flexible Interindividual perspective, the hard-won “project” (e.g., current career role) is open to question in favor of an inquiring after “Do I get what I want out of these projects?” or, even more, “Can I reexamine what it is that I really want?” The Institutional-to-Interindividual transformation is a shift from embeddedness in a current form to a consideration of the basic purposes of any forms (e.g., occupations) that the person might choose to take.

Institutionally embedded career decision makers can be challenged to hear their own inner, contradictory voices and those of others who say, “You are more than this job, profession, or belief system; these are but forms for bigger purposes and needs that may be expressed in many ways. Try to let a little light in on the sealed-up system that you are now.” The following illustration from this author’s clinical experience demonstrates both surface occupational change as well as Institutional-to-Interindividual developmental transformation. In this case, Jim, a 40-year-old man who was experiencing dissatisfaction and lack of success in, commercial real estate presented himself for counseling. He had concluded that he had no alternative but to pursue his current occupation, as he had invested time and other resources in it. Jim thought that he had to maintain a corporate position, as, in his words, “Well, I’ve always been in commercial real estate; I wouldn’t know how to be anything but a real estate manager!” This man had identified his self with his current occupational form.

Using Loder’s (1989) first moment as a guide, the counselor helped Jim to entertain his conflict intentionally and consciously. One aspect of this conflict was that he wished to promote social good through his work and was not able to do that in his current role. Through a process of being supported in his predicament, being encouraged to take time
to reflect (Loder's second moment, or Pause), and being challenged to consider other forms as well as other purposes in his life, this man opted for management work in the nonprofit sector. An image (Loder's third moment) had emerged, had been fleshed out (moment four, Repatterning), and was consequently acted on (moment five, Interpretation). Such change might have been limited to simple job or occupational change, but this man was later heard to say, "More than making this one change, I've reconsidered the whole way I make choices; whereas before I was locked into a kind of corporate image for myself, now I feel freer to step into new roles, like the one I have in this nonprofit organization now. I can see multiple possibilities for myself in the future, if I can remain open to my experiences and recognize my changing needs; I just feel more open and yet determined." The seeds of the Institutional-to-Interindividual shift can be heard in these words. The institutionally embedded adult might be helped by the developmentally oriented counselor to become more comfortable with incompleteness and therefore to consider heretofore unexplored alternative expressions of the self.

An Activity for Promoting Transformation: Dilemma Holding

A specific activity that help adults to develop more adaptively in midcareer has been suggested by Kegan (1991). In it, epistemological development is intentionally promoted by means of explicitly encouraging individuals to entertain and even to cherish contradictions in their work life. In this activity, clients are asked to reflect on what is dissonant for them in their careers. First, a conflict-highlighting question is posed: "How could you work be going better than it is now?" Then participants reflect on, in order:

1. The beliefs or convictions that undergird the responses to the question
2. The competing, contradictory, hidden beliefs that maintain the status quo
3. Their contributions to the less than optimal expression of the beliefs under number 1

Through this activity, Kegan suggested, individuals might hold themselves "in jeopardy of learning," first by becoming aware of the contradictions and second by working to resolve the conflicts. Kegan (1991) has suggested that such solving goes on in a group, which provides a supportive context for working on challenges to one's equilibrium. He suggested that complete resolution of the conflict is not the goal, but rather that increasing comfort in living with such tensions might signal developmental growth. Thus, this activity may help individuals to regularly welcome dissonant information, in contrast with denial, to honestly face competing aspects of themselves, to solve not merely a problem, but to "solve themselves" (Kegan, 1991).

RESEARCH NEEDED

Whether constructive development truly fosters one's ability to successfully encounter and adapt to career transition has not yet been demonstrated. Needed are studies that relate constructive developmental level to such measures of satisfactory career adjustment as career identity status (Tulloch, Dassance, & McKay, 1979), career maturity (e.g., Critics, 1978), person-environment congruence (Holland, 1973), and vocational identity (Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980). In the treatment realm, Loder's (1989) transformational model, Kegan's (1991) dilemma-poseing activity, or both might be explicitly applied and compared with information-oriented career interventions in future research.

CONCLUSION

Career counseling can be construed as a development-enhancing activity—one that helps individuals to achieve greater flexibility, renew their self-definition, and to live in a transformational, dialectical relationship to themselves and the environment. The principles of constructive-developmental theory may serve as a foundation for a career counseling paradigm in which career is treated as a quest, an unfolding that requires active participation by the meaning-making individual. In this formulation, neo-Piagetian constructive developmental theory describes what good counseling has always done: Encourage people to transform limiting, dysfunctional conceptions of themselves into possibilities that reflect greater opportunities for self-expression, less limited by circumscribed roles and more responsive to fundamental needs and talents. Career counselors, from this perspective, then, although they might continue to help clients to accumulate new information about themselves and their environments, also help them to identify their unarticulated fundamental values and needs, to explore the competing beliefs that leave those values unexpressed, and to translate the implications of this exploration into viable actions that are authentic responses to that data.

From the constructive-developmental perspective, seemingly simple transitions can be opportunities for deep structural transformation. The counselor's task is to assess his or her clients' implicit meaning-making stances, and to challenge and support clients in their dilemmas in a way in which clients might open up to new possibilities. Although surface career transitions may occur without deep structural change, such transition can also be an opportunity to shift one's meaning-making balance in the direction of more inclusive, flexible knowledge structures, that is, to undergo developmental transformation.

REFERENCES
