
Measuring People's Minds and Lives

Mildred Cahill

Sandra Martland

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Abstract

The increasing pluralism of Canadian society has opened up new avenues for research into levels of cultural identity, components of value-systems, interactions between people of different values, and effects of these on career development. The political, economic, and social shifts that are occurring today provide an opportunity to look at the contextual dimensions of career development. In this article, the authors caution career development investigators and/or practitioners to also attend to the needs of the less visible, minority cultures, for eg., those based on geographic location, throughout the country.

Résumé

L'augmentation du pluralisme dans la société canadienne a ouvert de nouvelles avenues de recherche aux niveaux de l'identité culturelle, des composantes des systèmes de valeurs, des interactions entre personnes ayant un système de valeurs différent et de leurs effets sur le développement de carrière. Les changements politique, économique et social qui se produisent aujourd'hui procurent une occasion de se pencher sur les dimensions contextuelles du développement de carrière. Dans cet article, les auteurs préviennent les chercheurs et les praticiens qui travaillent dans le domaine du développement de carrière de porter aussi attention aux besoins moins apparents des minorités culturelles tels que les besoins basés sur la situation géographique, à travers la province.

INTRODUCTION

Career development theories have grown out of a predominantly psychological foundation. The focus on the individual differences and, in many cases, deficiencies, stemmed from a positivist perspective that successful career development depends on the ability of the individual to adopt the values and behaviours of the dominant society of the time. Embedded in this approach are assumptions of homogeneity and stability of the occupational environment and social values. Cultural values, behaviours, and varying opportunity structures were relegated to the periphery; ethnic and demographic groups were treated as exceptions rather than integral to the main body of career theories. What is awakening the profession to the need for greater sensitivity to context is the structural changes that are taking place, particularly in the labour market, and the increasing pluralism of society.

The era of "economic man," tied to relatively consistent industrial growth in the post-World War II years, was shattered when a series of global recessions produced predictions that the next generation would not enjoy as high a standard of living as their elders, and a boom in global information stimulated a rethinking of society values around the issues of

health, the environment, and quality of life. At the same time, the growing number of immigrants from non-European cultures has made countries such as Canada into more pluralistic societies in which various value systems co-exist.

The stability of the industrial period provided a good environment to allow a focus on individual differences and the impact of these differences on career choice. For the majority of people living in urban centres, there was a wide range of occupational choices and there were realistic opportunities for material prosperity and upward mobility. The cultural homogeneity of the population that is assumed in studies and theories has always been a myth; people have been divided by ethnic background, religion, gender, location, and class. That this illusion was not challenged earlier may have been due in part to the sampling procedures used by researchers. The majority of studies have used a very narrow spectrum of the population, students of post-secondary institutions or high schools and, in the labour force, professionals and managers (Chartrand & Camp, 1991).

The political, economic, and social shifts that are occurring provide an opportunity to look at the contextual dimensions of career development. The stability of psychology-based measures can be tested in an environment of change; perceptions of and experience with the changing social and economic environments are likely to produce a reformation of values, attitudes, and behaviours relevant to career. The increasing pluralism of Canadian society also opens up new avenues for research into levels of cultural identity, components of value-systems, interactions between people of different values, and effects of these on career development. Studies of career processes among immigrant and indigenous peoples are among the most obvious. Cultural differences, however, are not limited to these groups. Although they are less visible, minority cultures exist throughout the population of the country on the basis of geography. The sense of place, environmental and social preferences, and community or geographical attachment may prove to have a significant impact on the individual's career.

PARADIGM SHIFT

In hindsight, much of the theorizing and prescriptive modelling since World War II is highly judgmental (especially the construct of career maturity). As a result, measurements have been used to determine the distance of individuals from the norm and interventions have generally aimed to bring deviants into the range of tolerable attitudes and behaviour. It was assumed that human behaviour could be studied objectively and that the problem was predominantly quantitative. Career theorists and practitioners cannot be faulted for this; the era was dominated intellectually by the notion of positivism and linearities. Studies take

place “in a shifting historical and intellectual context” (Slaney, 1988, p. 37).

The illusion of objectivity is giving way to recognition that researchers, as well as the people they study, make subjective decisions and interpretations. Interest in the concept of meaning-making (Herr & Cramer, 1991) and self-efficacy (Rooney & Osipow, 1992) reflect a possibilist philosophy acknowledging the uniqueness resulting from the free will of humans. A further step toward a non-judgmental approach is the trend toward ecological, phenomenological, and hermeneutic methodologies which are neither prescriptive nor controlling (Collin & Young, 1988). These strategies enable the discovery of qualitative differences and the incorporation of context into the career process. At the same time, they are more in keeping with the philosophical underpinnings of counselling because they demand empathy and subjective engagement of the researcher (Collin & Young, 1988).

Measurement, in this context, shifts from determining how far from the norm is the behaviour or attitudes of the individual to determining causes for the individual’s perception and action. Causes may be found in the individual’s personal, local and external environments, especially in critical incidents which the person has experienced. Measurement can also be applied to the person’s levels of satisfaction with their lives in general and with specific aspects or changes. Identifying patterns among groups of individuals is useful in developing career programs that target the needs of a particular audience. One method of uncovering similarities is the use of overlays, which enables an investigation of the variety of models accumulated over time.

The target group for career research may be defined by geographical location, social environment, or personal variables by which members are connected. Information may be gathered by a variety of means such as narratives and interviews. Narratives allow the subjects to freely express their feelings and thoughts on the conditions or events that led them to discover, choose, or reject options. However, there may be other considerations that the narrators take into account without being aware of them. For example, cultural beliefs are often taken for granted until the person is confronted with some threat to those assumptions (Cohen, 1982). To explore hidden influences, researchers may use interviews as a supplement to biographies. From the data, researchers can then develop interpretive maps of the career process by using hermeneutical approaches. Conditions and events, including feedback, may be weighted according to the emphasis given by the individuals on their importance, and feelings and thoughts can be similarly rated according to the intensity expressed. Graphically, these weightings may be represented by varying shades of colours. By super-imposing transparencies of the models of each subject, researchers can distinguish regularities.

Although this may seem an onerous task, computer programs are being developed to assist in the interpretation and graphic representation of text (Muhr, 1991) and in the analysis of maps (Weibel, 1992).

THE CONSTRUCT OF SPACE

There is ample evidence that geographical preference plays a major role in the decisions people make about their lives (Lewis & Thomas, 1987; Biggs & Bollman, 1991) and their attitudes, such as commitment to an employer (Hodson & Sullivan, 1985). The physical appearance and the social environment of urban neighbourhoods, rural communities, and isolated farms vary as does the level of attachment of the individual to those environments. The tenaciousness of farmers struggling to keep their land or the fishing family trying to maintain their community despite what, in an urban setting, would be poverty levels of income is perhaps the most dramatic evidence of attachment to place. People often identify themselves as a resident or native of a community, province or country; for many, place has meaning.

The physical and social environments act on individuals and the individuals act on the environments. Communities are not static but change in response to the actions of the residents, who in turn are influenced by personal, local, and external situations and events. The level of attachment, the attributes that give place meaning, and the effects of place on career are all worthy of study. It is also important to consider the dynamics between individuals or groups of individuals and their local environment.

Place affects the evaluation of career interventions in three distinct ways. Firstly, "norms" on career attitudes and behaviours, because they reflect the dominant culture, may sometimes be inappropriate in geographical areas where a different set of "norms" predominate. Secondly, because the world of work has different characteristics in different locations, knowledge of the range of occupations, employment standards, hiring practices, and working arrangements, must be assessed within the context of local labour markets. Thirdly, the concept of person-environment fit must extend beyond the realm of occupation to include the physical and social settings of all career activities.

THE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

Economic conditions change over time; change is not constant or predictable but punctuated by quite sudden shifts often followed by a period of stability. Critical incidents such as wars, discoveries, disasters, government policies, new technologies, or populist actions can precipitate fundamental changes in values, attitudes, behaviour, and conditions. The labour market is highly susceptible to such changes; depressions of the late 1800s and the 1930s are not dissimilar to what is being experi-

enced in the 1990s. As in the 1930s, the availability of work and the working arrangements are less stable; contract, temporary, and part-time work are constituting an increasing proportion of all jobs available. Between 1975 and 1986, the number of part-time paid workers increased by 80 percent, five times the rate of increase in the number of full-time paid workers (Krahn, 1991). The Labour Force Survey (Statistics Canada, 1992) shows that by early 1992, one in 20 Canadian employees had taken part-time jobs because they could not find full-time work. While such jobs have been associated mainly with the retail chains and take-outs, part-time work is also prevalent in the managerial/professional class, and particularly among those working in health and social services. Over a half million Canadians employed in either management positions or in upscale professions ranging from natural scientists to librarians reported in 1992 that they usually worked less than 30 hours a week. Although the highest incidence of part-time work occurs among women, approximately a third of involuntary part-timers are men and the number of men-occupied part-time jobs has been increasing at a much faster rate than full-time employment.

Own account self-employment is outstripping job creation by traditional employers (Corcoran, 1994). At least some of the 300,000 jobs lost in manufacturing over the past decade did not disappear but were rather transferred to the growing sector of business services (Postner, 1990). Covering a range of activities from cleaning to engineering, these smaller sub-contractors are often under as much management control as the client company's employees, but they do not enjoy the benefit of paid vacation, sick leave and so on that the company provides its regular workforce (Bogenhold & Staber, 1991).

Multiple job-holding has become an increasingly popular strategy, especially among part-time workers. The number of multiple job-holders has increased in every industrial sector (Statistics Canada, 1982, 1992). Although the numbers remain relatively small, they likely under-represent the incidence of combining work activities because they ignore the informal economy. Work performed under the barter system or through under-the-table deals may account for as much as 30 percent of the total value of goods and services in industrialized countries (Goldschmidt-Clermont, 1990).

The overall effect of the growth in non-standard working arrangements is a labour market where change is the norm rather than the exception. Over a two-year period in the mid-1980s, the majority of working-age people either changed jobs, moved in or out of unemployment, or in or out of the labour force, and over 4 million had been unemployed at some point. On average, labour force participants changed 3.3 times in two years. In regions of higher unemployment,

more people changed jobs or employment status and they did so more often, but were no more likely to remain steadily unemployed than people in more prosperous regions (Ross & Shillington, 1991).

The labour market has always varied from one locality to another in terms of availability of work and the range of occupational opportunities. The incidence of temporary and part-time work, for example, is higher in areas with high unemployment rates (Statistics Canada, 1992). Now that the instability has spread to a wider range of the population, it is an appropriate time to study the interactions between individuals and the labour market and individuals in context of employment uncertainty and instability. Maintaining and achieving life satisfaction during a period of diminished occupational opportunities or occupational insecurity may prompt a shift in personal values, attitudes, and actions as people search for meaning. Qualitative work is needed to uncover the dimensions of personal definitions of success, the means by which people achieve and maintain life satisfaction, and the attitudes that contribute to their positive self-assessments.

The assumption of occupational centrality needs to be tested within this context as well. Because the labour market is one of many arenas in which people function and from which they may derive satisfaction, the broader definition of career as a life story is more appropriate. The combination of employment, leisure, volunteer work, learning experiences, non-market labour, relationships, family, and personal projects is likely more important to an individual's satisfaction with life than any single dimension. In an era where periods of unemployment are becoming prevalent, there is a need to understand the ways in which people cope with the disruption and uncertainty, how they structure their time and what support systems they use. A soft systems approach (Checkland, 1981) may lend itself well to this research, in which the goals and dimensions cannot be clearly defined.

The development of this expertise will require a revamping of evaluation procedures. Current standardized evaluation methods are time-bound, reflecting the attitudes and behaviours that were suited to a relatively stable and prosperous labour market. The volatility produced by the present structural change requires acceptance of the value of lateral and downward occupational moves, moves in and out of the labour market, frequent occupational change, engagement in non-standard working arrangements, and multiple job-holding. Occupation cannot be assumed to be the principal source of self-esteem for every person; the evaluation of interventions must validate personal definitions of success and acknowledge the significance of the combinations of occupational and non-occupational roles to a person's feelings of self-worth.

THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Humans are social beings who function within contexts of communities to which they belong. Communities may be formed on the basis of geographical location, interests, activities, or values. What binds members of a community is a sense of shared meaning (Miller, 1992). Some, such as environmentalist or academic communities, may be broadly based but loosely structured. Others, such as small towns or certain workplaces, may be more cohesive and enduring. Attachment to community is intensified by regular interaction and communication among members and especially when these occur over long periods of time (Miller, 1992).

Modern communications systems have contributed to the development of communities in two ways; firstly, people may seek group membership to provide personal meaning and assert their identity in an increasingly globalized society, and secondly, they have the means to communicate frequently with others who share their interests or goals on a global basis. Because people develop their belief systems within contexts of the communities to which they belong, the role of community on career aspirations, expectations, and decision-making needs to be explored if counsellors are to gain a deeper understanding of the career process. Much of the career anxiety and indecision among counsellors' clients is related to the conflict between the individual's belief systems and those of the dominant society (Herr & Cramer, 1991).

Another aspect of communities that is relevant to career development is their propensity for collective action. In the occupational arena, this may take the form of employee takeovers of a company or lobbying for government policies to protect the livelihood of farmers or fishers. In the broader society, it may mean demonstrating against clear-cutting of old growth forests or lobbying against cutbacks to social programs. Through such activities, communities often influence the social and economic environment in which their members and others function. Because communities are sometimes in competition with each other, changes that benefit one group may be detrimental to others who have competing views. Understanding how successful collective action by one community impacts on the personal and collective identities of its own members and those of other communities may be important to understanding career identity.

The thrust of evaluation for career interventions has been the measurable changes in adherence to the *status quo* as perceived by the urban middle-class. In an era of changing social perspectives, where different communities of people seek to influence the organization of society, evaluation needs to capture the dimensions of community involvement and validate the diversity of worldviews held by different communities.

CONCLUSION

The aims of measurements are to understand more fully the complexities of career development, to provide a basis for developing interventions, and to evaluate interventions. The contributions of psychology have been numerous. However, they represent only a small part of the career picture. The contextual aspects of career involve many academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, human geography, and economics. Incorporating the knowledge that these disciplines can provide to the existing career theories will likely require reconsideration and modification of some beliefs and assumptions underlying career development models and even the definition of career.

At the macro-level, whether that is defined nationally or globally, quantitative measures cannot detect qualitative changes in such areas as social values, attitudes, or organization. During periods of structural change in any aspect of society that impacts on career, qualitative study is a better method of uncovering the important dimensions that individuals use in pursuing their careers. During periods of social and economic stability, quantitative measures are more appropriate for the majority of people.

At the meso-level, the local social and economic environments in which an individual functions, it is necessary to recognize that aggregate data hide the complexities that arise from different cultures, environments, labour markets, and social conditions. The assumption of a norm is inappropriate and even detrimental when applied to people who do not share the values of the majority or whose environment differs significantly from that of the major population areas. Career development cannot be expected to follow the same path across a nation. In fact, the career process in maritime cultures of Canada may be more similar to maritime cultures of other nations than to the urban-industrial society of the interior. Different does not necessarily mean deficient, and much qualitative research is required to reflect the plurality of contexts in which careers are pursued.

For the individual, adapting to the conditions imposed by economic and social structures is a major part of career development. At the same time, individuals may change their environment through collective actions such as unionization, employee takeovers, lobbying for government policies favourable to their career interests, and so on. What career specialists have to uncover are the reasons for some people achieving, maintaining, and sometimes recovering life satisfaction in contexts that debilitate others. A soft systems approach, which assumes career goals cannot be clearly defined, i.e., that personal definitions of success vary, may reveal the attitudes, skills, and behaviours that contribute strongly to life satisfaction or dissatisfaction within different cultural, geographical, economic, social, and personal contexts.

The outcome of this qualitative study will be a compilation of career models which may overlap in some key areas but differ significantly in others. By decentralizing career theory in this way, career specialists will acknowledge the existing diversity of individuals and the ways they interact with their environments to achieve happiness. Minority perspectives and career paths, rather than being relegated to the fringe, will be incorporated in the main body of career theory. Generalization will be achieved by identifying regularities but not at the expense of personal or local signatures.

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About the Authors

Mildred Cahill is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her research interests include career counselling, distance education, and rural education.

Sandra Martland is a Research Assistance for the Centre for the Development of Distance Career Counselling, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Address correspondence to: Mildred Cahill, Faculty of Education, G. A. Hickman Building, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland, A1B 3X8.

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