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MAKING SENSE OF CAREER THEORY

PETE ROBERTSON OFFERS A QUICK GUIDE TO READING THE CAREER THEORY LITERATURE FOR STUDENTS AND PRACTITIONERS

Career theory can seem a bit daunting. There are so many theories these days, and some are not an easy read. If you know how to approach reading career theory it gets a lot easier. When confronted with a new theory in a book chapter or journal article, here are some things to look out for. If you can answer some or all of these questions, it will help you break the theory code.

What do we know about the author(s)?
When reading any kind of literature it helps to locate it in the time and place it was written. Authors inevitably reflect the zeitgeist. Early career theory is not as tuned in to equality and diversity issues as modern material. Theory written in times of prosperity or recession may reflect the prevailing economic mood.

Theorists sometimes reflect their national culture. For example, authors from the USA tend to have an optimistic take on careers, perhaps reflecting the 'great American dream' that with hard work anyone can transform themselves into a success. Some of the British literature does not necessarily share this upbeat cultural assumption.

Academic discipline matters too. Authors will usually belong to an academic tribe and each discipline has its own micro-culture. A lot of career theory comes from psychology, but some is sociology, or other disciplines (like education or economics). If you know which discipline the author is from, that can help to understand their influences and pre-occupations. It is not always obvious, and you may have to look for subtle clues in the article. A rule of thumb is that the North American writers are nearly all psychologists, but the Europeans are more mixed and multi-disciplinary.

Big picture or small picture?
Theory is sometimes about what careers are like across a wide section of society, big picture stuff, and this *macro* perspective tends to come from the sociologists. But

some theories focus on what goes on inside one person's head, small picture stuff, and this *micro* perspective tends to come from the psychologists. Things get interesting with more modern career theory which is often pitched somewhere in the middle, a *meso* perspective, where the individual's interaction with their social context (family, groups and institutions) is the focus. Social scientists call this *level of analysis,* and it is important in understanding ideas. Career theory can adopt a micro, meso, or macro level of analysis.

What is the theory for?
Some career theory sets out to explain how careers function in the real world. It is essentially *descriptive*. In contrast, some career theory is *prescriptive*: it tells you how careers should work and how career decisions ought to be made. Trait and factor theories are a good example, as they set out how they think career choices ought to be made using their 'scientific' and 'rational' matching processes.

Quite a lot of ideas in our field are not really attempting to explain careers at all, but are intended to give practitioners a helping process to use with their clients. These are sometimes called *models of guidance*.

What assumptions are they making?
Assumptions are things you don't know you are making, so quite likely authors will not be able to tell you, so you will have to look for clues for these three types.

Assumptions about work: For example, older theories of vocational choice tended to assume that the world of work was reasonably stable, and that occupations were different from each other in important ways. Quite a lot of modern theories like to emphasise instability in the labour market, and use this as their starting point. Both positions could be critiqued.

Assumptions about human beings: Theories vary in the extent to which they see people as fixed entities as opposed to changing, evolving beings. Early matching theories liked to focus on enduring characteristics, whereas developmental and learning theories like to stress human plasticity.

Assumptions about freedom: Theories vary in the extent to which they see humans as free. This is sometimes called the structure versus agency debate. Some theories assume people have a lot of agency: they are free to make choices and reinvent themselves. Others prefer to see people and their careers as limited and constrained by the way in which society is structured.

What is the philosophy? And where is the evidence?
Just as academics divide between disciplinary tribes, they also divide between old school and new school perspectives. Traditional social science tends to favour research methods using numbers – quantitative methods – and research designs that use a lot of people. They are trying to be objective and scientific. They are sometimes described as *positivist.* New paradigm approaches reject the notion that the social world can be captured by

objective science and prefer research methods that use words – qualitative methods – using small samples and case studies. A good clue is that writers that talk a lot about their philosophy tend to be new paradigm. If they don't mention it they are more likely to have an old school world view.

We are digressing a bit into research here. Clearly theories that can show they have research evidence score lots of points over those that don't. But a word of caution. Most career theory is not formulated in a way that allows it to be proved or disproved. Authors are unlikely to seek out and publish data that undermines their own theory, so realistically the evidence we get to see is going to be skewed.

What's the big idea?
A lot of writing about career theory contains padding – digressions, or material to impress in order to get it published. Shutting out the unnecessary information is a useful habit. Often the central contribution of an article can be boiled down to one idea, and it can be helpful to try to summarise the argument in two or three sentences.

So what?
There is no need to be intimidated by career theory; it is not sacred text, just an author's perspective. Have fun with it, play with it, critique it, agree or disagree with it. Theories are best learnt not by rote, but by thinking, discussing and arguing. At the end of the day, it is practitioners who get to decide whether a concept is useful, or whether it belongs in the dustbin of history. You are the ultimate judge of what adds value to your practice. You get to ask the 'so what?' question.

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