Expand your vistas — get into career theory

Several years ago I toiled my way through the Theories module on the AGCAS diploma. As I was banging my head against the wall for the umpteenth time whilst trying to make some sense of an article on career theory that seemed to have been written with the sole intention of confusing me, I said to myself, "This had better be useful for something!" At the time I couldn't quite figure out what it might be useful for, apart from giving me concussion.

The biggest problem with articles on career theory is that they are written by academics. Therefore they are written to impress other academics rather than to provide something useful for practising careers advisers. That's why they are full of words, such as "hermeneutic", "phenomenological", "epistemological", "heuristic" and the like. Because of this, most careers advisers only look at theories when they are forced to during their professional qualification, and they try to forget about the traumatic experience as soon as they can afterwards.

Perhaps it was that nagging feeling that it ought to be more useful than it seemed. Perhaps it was the brain damage brought on by all that head banging combined with a masochistic streak. Whatever it was, having finished the diploma, I decided that I didn't want to forget about theories, so I did what I normally do when I want to find out more about something: I promised to deliver some training. Since then I have run various bits of training on career theory within my own service and for other institutions. One thing I have learned from the feedback is that lots of other people obviously have the same nagging feeling that they ought to know more and that, if they did, it might be useful. Another thing I have learned is that when we get past the jargon, some of the insights we can gain from having an understanding of career theories have the potential to help us become better careers advisers.

How not to use career theories

I don't suggest that we should memorise all the various theories, and then examine each candidate to see which ones might fit him or her. Nor am I suggesting that, like Jess on the fast show, we should say, "This week, I are been mostly using Social Cognitive Career Theory."

However, looking at individual theories in more detail can help us to become more systematic in the way we build up a picture of a client. In plain language, they can stop us missing things because we forget to ask about them. I find that certain theories give me a set of questions I can ask myself about a client as I attempt to understand their situation more fully. Applying a particular theoretical perspective after the event, as part of case conferences or peer reviews, can be useful in identifying what I missed at the time. This helps me to be more effective next time.

Having said that, I don't believe that we need to understand everything a particular theory is on about in order to benefit from it. There have been occasions when I have gained a really useful insight from reading about a theory, even though I later discovered that I hadn't properly understood what I was reading. In many ways, it's not the theory itself that is important; it's what you do with it. All we need is to gain a new insight, to experience a different way of thinking or to be challenged by a though-provoking idea — something to make us reflect on what we do, how we do it and why.

How can theories make me a better careers adviser?

A vast number of factors can influence the process of career choice: deep psychological impulses, life experiences and social background, individual personality and learning style, even the condition of the economy. How can we keep track of all of the possible influences that might affect an individual? How can we know which are the most important?

One of the benefits of having at least a surface understanding of a range of career theories is that you can see how different theorists have chosen to emphasise some factors and ignore others. They have made assumptions about which things are important and which are negligible in order to make a very complex process a bit easier to describe and understand. This can be thought provoking when we start to look at our own assumptions about what is and isn't important.

Obviously, we treat each client as an individual; we listen to their story and try to understand them. But how do we know that we are hearing everything? Every statement a client makes, we filter and interpret according to our own set of assumptions and opinions. These assumptions are based on our previous experiences and our personality. They make up our own internal default career theory. We may not be conscious of this theory, but it will be there in the background. It determines what we notice and what we overlook. It determines how we see our role and how we choose to approach a client.

Choosing different angles

There are various ways of categorising particular theories based on their biases. These can help us to examine the biases of our own assumptions. Think about whereabouts you would naturally position yourself on the following scales.

- **Psychological or sociological?** What do you focus on first, the inner drives and dreams of the individual or the external realities of the labour market?
- **Objective or subjective?** Do you believe that the best way to evaluate a career is through consistent, describable and measurable factors or do you think that it is open to individual interpretation?
- **Universal or contextual?** Do you find that the same absolute truths tend apply to everyone or that it depends on the person, the situation and the time?
- **Autonomous or deterministic?** Do you presuppose that everyone is free to make whatever decision they choose or do you thing that most people's actions are determined by external influences?
- **Dynamic or static?** Do people's attitudes and preferences change from day to day or do they remain fairly stable and predictable throughout adulthood?
- **Outcome or process?** Do you think that what really matters is the end result or that the journey of discovery is more important than the final decision?
- **Premeditated or opportunistic?** Do careers work best when people decide beforehand what goals they want to achieve or when they take advantage of whatever chance events come their way?

For example, our natural tendency might be to assume that each individual should be able to make autonomous decisions. However, we may come across clients for whom this approach doesn't work, for example in some cultures individualism and autonomy can be less important than collective decision making and cultural conformity. Rather than trying to force the clients to see things from our frame of reference, we could try approaching them from a "deterministic" angle, exploring the external influences that are determining their actions and choices. This may be easier for the client to relate to and we may make better progress.

By increasing the number of "angles" we can approach a client from, we increase the likelihood that we will be able to help clients whose frame of reference is different from our own.

Further reading

As mentioned, most writing on career theory is somewhat dry and turgid. However, *Career Theory to Practice: Learning Through Case Studies* by Jane Swanson and Nadya Fouad (Sage Publications, ISBN: 076191143X) is more useful than most. It presents several different career theories and then examines the same client case study from each perspective.

For the academically oriented amongst you I would recommend *Career Choice and Development* by Duane Brown and associates (Josey-Bass, ISBN: 0787957410) as a solid reference work.