

# Context and Models for the Analysis of Individual and Group Needs

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This article summarizes the papers presented in the discussion group focused on the theme “Models for the Analysis of Individual and Group Needs” at the joint symposium of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance, Society for Vocational Psychology, and National Career Development Association held in Padua, Italy, in September 2007 titled *Vocational Psychology and Career Guidance Practice: An International Partnership*. The predominant theme that emerged from papers and discussion was that theory and practice need to be positioned within their proximal and distal contexts, ranging from personal to societal contexts.

In the 2007 joint symposium of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance, Society for Vocational Psychology, and National Career Development Association, participants in the discussion group that addressed the analysis of individual and group needs were challenged to consider the role of theory in research and practices, inclusive of individual, organizational, community, or government practices. A range of theories, many derived from the constructivist and social constructionist schools of thought, were discussed in relation to both research and practice. Discussions emphasized the need for practices to be located with the individual’s presenting issue, within relevant context, and not from the standpoint of theory alone. Respecting a synthesis of models, this article highlights the importance of viewing the concepts of career and career development from the proximal and distal contexts of the person. Examples of practice or empirical studies have been included to expand on the importance of context for the analysis of individual and group needs.

## Context: A Metatheoretical Lens for Analysis

Participants in the discussion group argued that the theories and practices of career development for the contemporary world of work have limited meaning unless they are situated in their specific context and, in turn, understood as differentiated from other contexts. Context can be conceptualized as an abstract dimension extending from local to global; with local context at the level of the individual person and his or her proximal environment through to global context, which is at the level of distal societal environment that imbues the individual with a range of influences. Of course, the notion of context is not unfamiliar to contemporary vocational psychology and career development theory. Consider,

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as examples, its explicit positioning within the systems theory framework (STF; Patton & McMahon, 2006) and the contextualist-action theory (Young, Valach, & Collin, 2002) and its relation to cultural psychology and social practices (Richardson, Constantine, & Washburn, 2005). Indeed, theories and practices may be better understood and applied when situated within a dimension of context. In this way, context can be taken as a metatheoretical heuristic lens (cf. Chen, 2003). It should be noted that although there is conceptual correspondence between the notions of context and culture (Young, Marshall, & Valach, 2007), they are not necessarily ethnically bound concepts, because they may refer to practices associated with geographic location, social class, organization, family, or workplace.

To illustrate the theoretical and pragmatic value of context as an organizing framework, Heppner (2007) set the scene for the discussion group by drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model to consider vocational behavior in a globalized, multicultural world of work. Heppner suggested that the training of career development practitioners may need to be reviewed with respect to how it prepares practitioners to understand issues that are not fully appreciated within traditional theories (e.g., social class, internalized oppression). Heppner argued that an ecological approach would provide a means of including those issues that are currently excluded or inadvertently minimized in theory and practice. Heppner suggested that an ecological perspective would assist practitioners and researchers to think and act beyond the intrapersonal domain and to position the person within nested layers of ecological systems. She also suggested that future research and practice in the field of career development should include the development of methods to enable clients to assess the impact of their ecosystem on their career.

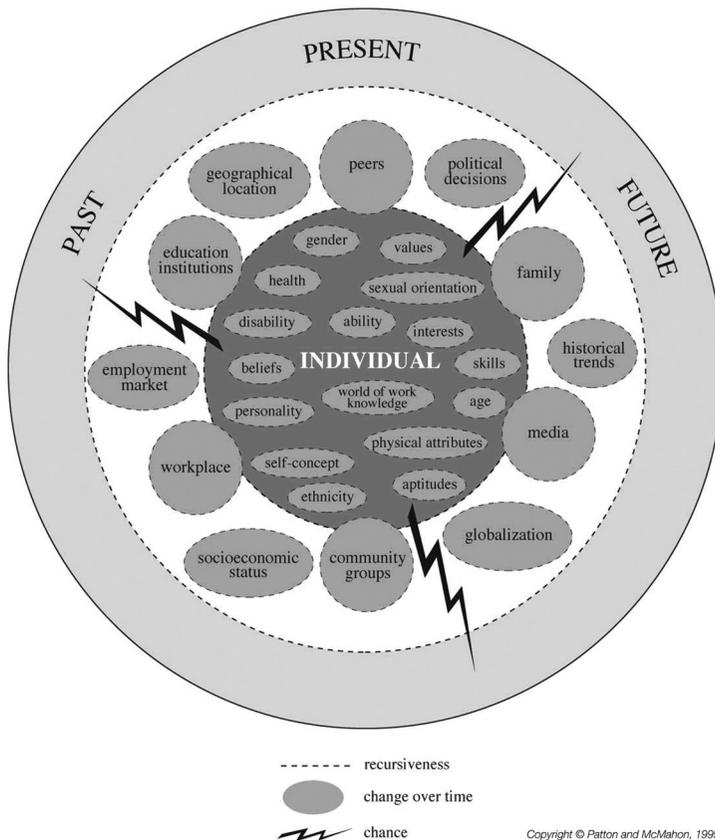
## Contextualized Sites for Analysis

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In framing the analysis of individual and group needs from the perspective of context, we have formulated a summary of the papers and research outcomes around sites within contexts. The term *site* indicates a positioning within the contextual world of individuals, ranging from the proximal to the distal. We commence with the proximal site of conversation and end with the distal site of national, international, and cultural influences. This analysis is consistent with the tenets of the STF, which comprehensively contextualizes the individual (Patton & McMahon, 2006) as an entity-in-context. Figure 1 depicts the STF and the range of influences that make up the individual in his or her context.

The STF holds that an individual's experience of career is best understood when the entire host of recursively interacting career influences of the person's life are included in the formulation process, however significant they may be. The STF also offers a higher level theoretical framework that facilitates scholarly endeavors to synthesize theories, research, and practices (McMahon & Watson, 2007a, 2007b). In this case, we have used the STF to structure our thinking on the research presented in the discussion group.

*Conversation as a site.* In the social constructionist framework (Young & Collin, 2004), discourse is taken as the predominant and ineluctable fabric of psychosocial context. By conceptualizing the individual as a



**FIGURE 1**  
**Systems Theory Framework**

*Note.* From *Career Development and Systems Theory: A New Relationship* (p. 164), by W. Patton and M. McMahon, 1999, Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole. Earlier versions have been published by New Hobsons Press. Copyright © 1999 by Patton & McMahon. Reprinted with permission of the authors.

social entity-in-dialogue (cf. Sarbin, 1986) and using the theory of dialogical self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993), McIlveen (2007) argued that personal identity and career identity were dialogical transactions inextricably bound to the historical, environmental, and cultural discourses in which a person exists and evolves (cf. Guichard, 2005). This dialogical approach assumes that identity is an ongoing story lived in conversations with oneself or others—real or imagined—in a feed-forward and constant process of editorial revision. McIlveen (2006) exemplified this assumption through a narrative career assessment and counseling procedure he called “My Career Chapter.” This procedure requires individuals to construct a short story of their career by writing specifically in relation to the many systems of influences in their career life. The resulting story becomes the grist for the counseling process of *storying*.

*The working alliance as a site.* Extending from the site of conversation into the therapeutic domain, the microsystem of the career counseling relationship, Collins and Arthur (2007) argued that the working alliance is a site at which to understand and transcend cultural differences, whether in counseling, supervision, or higher level processes such as organizational consulting. Indeed, it has been lauded as an important site for research in vocational psychology (Heppner & Heppner, 2003). *Working alliance* has been defined in various operational terms (e.g., A. O. Horvath & Greenberg, 1989). In their work, Collins and Arthur formulated working alliance as extending from the usual microlevel through to the macrosystems levels. This inclusive model accounts for personal factors (e.g., family, personality, education), contextual factors (e.g., social norms, environment, rural and urban location), universal factors (e.g., spirituality, mortality, physiology), cultural factors (e.g., social class, ethnicity, language), and ideological factors (e.g., ageism, sexism, heterosexism, elitism, racism, ableism). Their broad and inclusive approach echoes other approaches that specifically recognize the myriad systems of influences in the client–practitioner relationship (e.g., McMahon & Patton, 2006; Richardson, 2000).

While suggesting that working alliance can include a host of intrapersonal through to broader cultural factors, Collins and Arthur (2007) included, moreover, the notion of ideological factors as being crucial to the establishment of a wholesome working alliance. The recognition of ideological factors has implications for what transpires in counseling, because it is within the confluence of the client–counselor dyad that ideologies may synergize or clash (cf. McIlveen & Patton, 2006; Richardson, 2000). The relevance of ideological factors was exemplified in the presentation by Castellini and Sacchi (2007), whose empirical study indicated that university students' career choices respecting occupational aspirations may be differentiated on the basis of political attitudes.

*Learning as a site.* Learning and career development have a long association (Guichard, 2001). Bassot (2007) continued the social constructionist argument that self- and career identity are personally felt as psychological experiences but are also formed in social and cultural transactions. Bassot used Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the proximal zone of development as an explanatory model to argue that individuals engage in social construction of their career identity. This approach to the individual-in-context assumes that an individual may develop and evolve his or her career identity through engaging in communities of practice that enable him or her to reposition in a new discursive context. Bassot exemplified her theoretical assertion through a visuo-graphical career assessment and counseling procedure of *joining the dots*. Through this process, the client is given space to draw graphical images that represent elements of his or her career, all the while engaging in dialogue with the practitioner. Through dialogical interaction, the client moves from one place of understanding himself or herself in dialogue and learning through others, to another career identity. Bassot's approach reflects the argument that career intervention may be conceptualized as a learning process (see Heppner & Heppner, 2003).

In highlighting developments in the Netherlands, Oomen (2007) demonstrated how career development learning may be subsumed by a contextual system (i.e., a school), yet have a reflexive role in transform-

ing the educational system. Oomen argued that the implementation of a career development strategy for school children positively influenced the staff of the school because of their regarding it as a resource for school improvement according to national standards. In this way, students' learning transformed their teachers' learning, thus it exemplified the reflexivity of engagement in discursive contexts and movement across zones of proximal development. Within a framework of adult lifelong learning, de Gregorio and Pavoncello (2007) presented a study demonstrating how Italian organizations' human resources departments emphasized career development coaching for their employees as a process to enhance performance and less as a strategy for staff retention.

*The body as a site.* Wehmeyer's (2007) presentation of a study of persons with a disability suggested that their attitudes of self-determination were related to life satisfaction. In view of the working alliance and issues pertaining to disability (e.g., ableism in the form of not being treated as an adult), one must consider afresh the assumptions of practitioners in a client-counselor relationship with a person with a disability. Gender and age were also shown to be issues in the career development of adolescents and young adults in Spain, particularly in reference to different traditional cultural expectations pertaining to finances, family, and work (Sanchez et al., 2007). The study presented by Sanchez et al. highlighted that although young Spanish women were relatively free of gender-based expectations for themselves as women, young men held stereotypical views of what women should consider appropriate for their career.

*Work as a site.* Massoudi's (2007) study reaffirmed that the psychological experience of stress in the workplace was a phenomenon that could only be understood from a transactional perspective in which the individual's cognitive and emotional states and traits were interconnected with work-environment factors. T. Horvath (2007), for example, suggested that Hungarians in their mid-20s were experiencing angst as a quarter-life crisis because of issues pertaining to their transition into the workforce and the struggle to establish career stability in the early phases of their careers. Both studies reinforced the argument that vocational psychology must reconsider the position, value, and meaningfulness of work in an individual's life (cf. Blustein, 2006).

*A national economic site.* By using South Africa as a case example, Watson (2007) emphasized that context must be considered from the level of the person through to the level of national economic, educational, and policy trends. He argued that in the South African context, traditional theories predominantly based on North American psychologies tended to be limited in their relevance and meaning. This author suggested that there has been too much simplistic replication of theories and practices into new contexts, with a result that the theories and practices have been rendered inappropriate, and he opined that theories may (metaphorically) be lost in translation (also see Watson, 2006). Although there has been progress in the advancement of career development in middle- and lower income nations (Hansen, 2006) and critical scholarship on its nexus with social justice (e.g., Blustein, 2006; Irving & Malik, 2005), the transfer of theory and practices between and within lower and upper income nations may need to be given serious consideration in the future.

In summarizing the papers of the discussion group, Chung (2007) extended Watson's (2007) high-level analysis and raised concerns regarding the predominance of the North American approach and the pressing need for other nations' theories and practices to be raised and considered in a global context, rather than from the lens of a Western context. Chung used the term *globalocalization* to emphasize that, as vocational guidance professionals, we need to localize what we learn globally and noted that it is dangerous to try to talk about career development knowledge without understanding localization. Chung was not disparaging of North American theory and practices per se, instead he argued that healthy diversity of theory and practices was reliant on the encouragement of other perspectives. He emphasized the importance of truly globalizing, rather than "Westernizing," and the need for us to be more culturally sensitive with respect to our theory and our practice.

## Conclusion

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In summary, the discussion group's papers and discussions pertaining to the analysis of individual and group needs centered on the potential for context as a broad organizing framework for theorizing, research, and practice. Discussions on defining context ensued, including a focus on issues of diversity and inclusivity. In addition, participants discussed the recognition that context can be acted on by individuals, as well as having an impact on individuals. Finally, the importance of synthesizing the context of the practitioner and of the client was emphasized. Supporting meaningfulness in all work activity was expressed as a goal of career development practice. In recognizing the vitality of context, a concomitant goal for research and practice includes working toward broadening the range of people served by career development.

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