

Reflective practice: Melding theories and practices  
through supervision

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Theoretical and technical diversity in the field of career development surely has to be a virtue for its relevance to the contemporary worlds-of-work. Indeed, much has been written about this diversity in terms of the differences and divisions between and among schools-of-thought, theories, and practices of career development, along with commentary on the scope for their integration (e.g., Patton & McMahon, 2006; Savickas & Lent, 1994). The “problem” of theoretical and technical integration can assume a variety of shapes: the paradigmatic and professional differences between one discipline of career development and another (e.g., education, human resources management, or psychology); the differences among theories and practices of particular schools-of-thought within a discipline (e.g., within vocational psychology: trait-and-factor, social cognitive, social constructionist); and the differences among research paradigms and methods which produce the knowledge of a discipline or school-of-thought (e.g., positivist and constructivist paradigms; quantitative and qualitative research methods). If we are to accept the assertions that there is a problem-to-be-solved with respect to the integration of theories and practices, then how should we proceed?

One perspective is that the problem (and solution) of theoretical and technical integration ultimately rests within the individuals who are active in the field: counsellors, human resource managers, employment officers, academics, policy experts, teachers, trainers, coaches, and so on. So, for a moment, put aside the critical question which challenges the integrationist argument, that is: Why should there be integration given the need for theoretical and technical diversity in the contemporary worlds-of-work? Instead, consider how the divide between theory and practice could be traversed by the individual in the field of career development, regardless of disciplinary affiliation.

The grand contest of ideas in the field plays out in rigorous scientific testing and artful application of one or another theoretical model or technique in the “real world”; and it is the vigour of the grand contest that determines and progresses the pragmatic value of any particular theory or technical tool in a given era. If we are to situate this quandary at the site of the individual career development practitioner, and make him/her responsible for critical thinking and practice, then armchair contemplation—as I am doing now by writing this manuscript, and as you are doing by reading it and critically contemplating its veracity and value from your perspective—also plays a role in maintaining the disciplinary pressure to ensure that theories and practices remain vibrant in terms of how both could be improved, conceptually and practically.

Beyond armchair contemplation there is a more rigorous approach to knowing, or constructing knowledge, which is embedded in notions of the *epistemology of practice* (Polkinghorne, 1992). With respect to a personalised epistemology embedded in practice, the notion of *reflective practice* (Schön, 1983) offers a vehicle to cross the apparent divide between theory and practice; for it is through reflective practice that an individual—scholar, practitioner, or both—constructs, revises, and understands his or her actions as a unique way of knowing, experiencing, and pragmatically implementing and testing his or her discipline in the field.

Reflective practice should entail an active process in which the individual, practices, and theories, are brought together in a triadic dynamic, recursively influencing one another. For example, *reflective inquiry on practice* (Shapiro & Reiff, 1993) involves a systematic

analysis of philosophy (e.g., practitioner's values), basic theory (e.g., personality), theory of techniques (e.g., psychometrics), techniques (e.g., interest inventory), and the act of applying interventions (e.g., assessing an individual's career interests). Each element of the analysis produces its own insights in terms of reflecting upon practice, and can inform reflection upon another element. For example, how does what I morally believe influence my choice of theory, which in turn influences how I choose and implement a career development technique in practice? This approach can be used to reflect upon the dynamic relationships amongst person, theory, and practice.

The *Professional Standards for Australian Career Development Practitioners* (Career Industry Council of Australia, 2006) call for the application of career development theory to practice. Reflective practice could be used to guide the implementation of such a standard by facilitating the individual engaging with and constructing his or her epistemology of practice. There are, of course, questions to be answered for reflective practice to be implemented effectively and appropriately. What evidence is there to conclude that reflective practice has a constructive benefit upon theories, practices, and individuals in the field? Are there models of reflective practice which are suited to some disciplines in the field better than others? How should reflective practice be taught, encouraged, and supported in the field of career development? How can the Career Industry Council of Australia and its Member Associations, along with the mandate of promulgating the professional standards, institute policies to explore and facilitate the development of reflective practice in the career development industry? There are similar questions pertaining to supervision and self-supervision.

Various forms of reflective practices can be effectively embedded in the process of professional supervision of career development practice (McMahon, 2004) and in career development research (McIlveen, 2008). Such supervision may take place with a senior colleague or a peer, or a group of colleagues collaborating together to ensure a disciplined approach to their practice. Along with supervision of one's practice by another person, self-supervision and self-monitoring offer a viable means of engaging in reflective practice and lifelong learning (McMahon, 2006). Notwithstanding a question regarding the extent to which individuals in the career development field actively engage in supervision or, indeed, self-supervision or self-monitoring, there should be some consideration given to the constructive potential of supervision and self-supervision to act as frameworks for reflective practice. The challenge for the profession lies in how to develop systems of professional supervision in terms of practitioner education and training (e.g., initial degree qualifications), and with respect to the requirements for ongoing professional development in which supervision is formally encouraged and recognised—if not mandated—by the Career Industry Council of Australia.

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