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Boosting professional credibility, confidence and compassion:

Julia Yates highlights the value that career development theories can add to our practice

I have spent a lot of the last few years thinking about career development theories – the ones that try to explain how and why people make their career choices, and how careers develop. I find them fascinating but they are not without their flaws: there are too many, they aren't generally very clearly explained and it's hard to know how to use them in practice. I have seen career theories taught very well in courses, and have seen lots of accessible, clearly written guides to the key theories. But despite this, most of the career practitioners I speak to – both those who are very experienced, and those fresh from their studies - generally say that they don't really use these theories; they would like to, but just don't quite know how to.

I thought I would see if I could find some positive stories – from practitioners who do use theories in their work and who find them beneficial, so I interviewed 30 theoretically-minded career practitioners. Their stories bowled me over. Their knowledge of theories was brilliant, they applied the theories in their practice skilfully and expertly and they all had some great examples of using the theories in a wide range of different contexts. They were very impressive.

Why use theories?

The practitioners identified three key reasons for using theories.

1. Theories lead to deeper understanding

Most commonly, the practitioners found that using theories helped them to understand their clients more deeply and more quickly. One of the participants gave a good example of this, explaining that when she was a client who said they were interested in law:

'rather than just accepting that a client wants to be a lawyer, you think about where the idea came from (opportunity structures), whether they would fit in (trait and factor), how it suits their life roles (LifeSpan LifeSpace), how it fits with their identity (identity theory).'

The theories can have the same impact on the clients themselves and the practitioners spoke about how explaining a one idea from a theory can help clients to see themselves more clearly.

2. Theories lead to greater confidence

The practitioners in this study talked about theories as a way to boost their credibility and confidence. Their understanding of the theoretical basis for their work made them feel more professionally credible, and they used their knowledge of theories to explain their work to stakeholders, often saying that theories proved to others that *'it's not easy to become a careers adviser'*.

For clients, confidence came from the way that the theories can normalise or validate their own choices. Knowing that their experiences are the subject of a theory seemed to make clients feel less isolated and less unsure of their own decisions.

3. Theories lead to better professional practice

The practitioners used the theories to guide their conversations perhaps to develop a *'working hypothesis'* about what was going on with a client, which could give them ideas about what to do next: *'what questions to ask, what direction to take the conversation and some ideas for solving the problems'*. Some used theories to reflect on their practice and

found that this made them more self-compassionate, making them feel better about *'the small steps and the small progress'*.

Learning about theories

The practitioners were positive about how the theories were taught on their career courses, effusive about the way their course tutors made the theories come alive for them. They had also kept up to date with new ideas and theories in the field, but found this a bit more tricky and generally would welcome more theory-related CPD. Interestingly, although they felt that their career courses taught the theories really well, they reported that there was a gap in teaching how to use the theories in their practice: they left their courses understanding the theories, but not able to integrate them into their practice.

Conclusion

Our jobs are not easy and anything that we can do to make us more efficient, more effective and more credible is always welcome. I said at the start that I am a theory fan, but the practitioners in this study took this to a whole new level. I was left quite convinced that more of a focus on career development theories could make a real difference to our practice, to our clients and to the standing of our profession. So watch this space! Claire Johnson at the CDI and I have been talking, and I am working on developing some resources - some theory cards, a collection of case studies and perhaps a some further training. And do let me know if you yourself are a theory-enthusiast – I'd love to collect some more stories.

Top Five Traditional Career Theories

Planned Happenstance

Shared explicitly with clients to help to normalise and validate the choices they make

Community Interaction

Used to help the practitioner understand how the client came to see the world or work in a particular way

Trait and Factor

Helps to understand where employers are coming from but also shared with clients to show how we used to see career choice

Life Stages

Often used with more mature clients, allowing both practitioner and client to see career as just one aspect of life

Opportunity Structures

Helps practitioners to understand some of the factors that have shaped their clients

Top Five Less Well-known Theories

Graduate Capitals

A useful framework to help prepare students for the next stage

Career Construction Theory

Shared with clients to help them feel that they can take some control of their own career paths

Identity Theory

Highlighting that career choices are choices about who we want to be, not just what we are want to do

Trans-theoretical model of change

An outline of the stages of change – a reassuring reminder that the process isn't straightforward or linear

Positive Psychology

Theories and exercises that can clients to explore what is going to help them to flourish in their careers

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