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Chapter 3

What value can theories add?

Overview

In this section, I offer an overview of some of the key benefits that career development theory can bring to career practice, looking specifically at the contribution that they can make to practitioners, practice and clients.

Introduction

The goal of this entire book is to try to help career development professionals to use career theories within their practice and in this chapter I want to give an overview of the value that they can add. No doubt you have decided to read this book because you are already at least somewhat convinced that theories can add value, so I know I am preaching to the converted here. But I do think it's worth unpicking the range of contributions that theories can make, not just to reassure you that you are not wasting your time, but also to encourage you to think about theories broadly, and to look out for opportunities to use them in different ways at different times.

The details in this chapter have come from a few different sources. Some are from my own practice. I have been a career professional for 25 years and have worked with all sorts of clients. I draw on theories in different ways in my career coaching conversations, and have included here some of the ways in which I see them add value. Most of the ideas, however, are from other people. A few years ago I conducted a piece of research with careers advisers in the UK. I spoke to 30 self-confessed theory-geeks about how they used theories in their practice and the value that they felt the theories added to their work. I found their stories inspirational and the ideas in this chapter are mostly drawn from our discussions.

The benefits of theory-informed practice

The benefits of theory-informed practice can broadly be grouped into three: deeper understanding, greater confidence and more effective practice.

Benefit One: Deeper Understanding

- *Insights for practitioners*

First and foremost, theories can help us to understand our clients and their stories more quickly and at a deeper level. As your client starts to tell their story, bells start ringing in your head. You link different aspects of their story to different theories you know about, and you can start to build up an understanding of where they might be coming from and what they

might have experienced. This leads to greater empathy as you begin to see their story from more angles and get a more in-depth understanding of their experiences. Theories can also help you to know which questions to ask. Asking the right questions can help you to build your relationship with your clients, as you show that you understand their situation, they can lead to more efficient and effective conversations, and they can help to move the conversation in the most useful direction.

- *Insights for our clients*

It is sometimes really valuable to share the theories explicitly with clients as this can lead directly to insights for them. Some theories might be a bit complicated to describe in a short conversation, but a brief overview or even a quick sketch might be easily incorporated. Theories are there to explain things, and using them to explain your clients' experiences to themselves can be enormously revealing and extremely valuable.

Practice Tip

Although theories can very often help you to understand your client better, one thing to guard against is making assumptions. It can be tempting to make a connection between a client's story and a particular theory early on in the conversation, but the risk here is that you assume that you understand their experience and then you stop listening. Theories can help you to relate to your client's story, but it will be a rare occasion when a single theory maps completely onto your client's experience. Remembering that no theory will apply perfectly, and keeping a number of different theories in your mind at once can help with this.

Benefit Two: Greater Confidence

Theory-informed practice boosts confidence in a number of ways

- *Confidence in your professional choices*

Knowledge of theories can make practitioners feel more confident that they are doing the right things and going in the right direction. If you are basing your career workshops on a tried and tested theory you can feel confident that you are covering the key topics; if you suggest an exercise to a client that comes from a theoretical approach, you can feel sure that it is a sensible choice.

- *Confidence in your professionalism*

We all develop our own theories about our clients, about careers and about the world of work. Finding a theory that maps onto something that we have already observed can make us feel very positive about our own understanding, and seeing a theory in a client's story can make us feel confident that we really know what we are talking about.

- *Credibility with stakeholders*

It can feel like an uphill struggle to convince some of the people that we work with that we are the highly skilled, well-trained experts that we are. Mentioning that our work is underpinned by a strong theory base clearly demonstrate our professionalism. Referencing theories with clients, teachers, senior leaders and managers can give an immediate boost to our credibility, demonstrating that actually, it's not that easy to be a career professional.

- *Validation for clients*

Clients often come to us with low levels of confidence and high levels of anxiety. It's common to see clients who feel that they have failed or let their families down, or who feel that they are lagging behind their peers. A powerful way to make them feel more positive is to share with them a theory that reflects or explains their situation. This shows them that they are not alone, that their situation is not out of the ordinary, and that what they have been going through is 'a thing'. It is amazing what a relief this can be, as the theory normalises their experience and validates their choices.

Benefit Three: More Effective Practice

The two points above – deeper understanding and more confidence - can in themselves lead directly to better practice but in addition, theories can contribute to our professional planning and reflective practice.

- *Planning*

Theories can be used to help us to plan interventions and can help to make sure that the content and approach that we choose is as effective as possible.

- *Reflective practice*

Theories can be a useful lens through which to reflect on your practice. You could consider a client and think about their situation through a number of different theoretical lenses, conceptualising their story through one or two different theories. As well as allowing you to reflect on your clients and your own practice, this approach can encourage you to be a little more self-compassionate: the theories can show how hard the whole process is for your clients, and can remind you that there is a limit on what you should expect yourself to achieve.

Using theories for reflection

David Winter

When you're using theories for reflection, you obviously have to start with getting to grips with the theory itself – working out what the theory says, what the key assumptions are. But one thing I would say is, don't sweat whether you've really understood it properly or not. It's easy to get hung up on whether you accurately understand the details of the theory, but for the purposes of reflection that doesn't necessarily matter. Even if you have technically misunderstood the theory, as long as it's giving you a different perspective on the client or your interaction, it's still useful. If

it helps you to become aware of something you weren't aware of at the time, then it's serving its purpose in reflection.

One thing I often do with a theory is to turn it into a set of default questions. I ask myself, what questions would be at the forefront of my mind if I assumed that this theory was true? So, for example, if you believed that Circumscription and Compromise was a complete and accurate description of reality for a client, you would tend to ask yourself about the career options that a client was not even looking at because they had labelled them in their early life as inappropriate for someone of their gender or social background. You'd be looking out for the options they had labelled as desirable but inaccessible to them and trying to identify what those inaccessible options said about the client's ideal career values. If you review your interaction with a client with these issues at the front of your mind, you may notice something that you didn't notice at the time. You may spot instances where you could have pursued an unexplored line of enquiry with the client.

One of the key things is about using theories in practice is that even if you don't engage with theories, you have a theory. We are theory-making creatures and part of what we're trying to do in life is to make sense of our world and create meaning. We do this through coming up with our own theories about what is going on. So with every experience you have with a client, you'll be building up your own implicit theory about how things work and what's important. And, unless you kind of have something to compare that implicit theory with, it will influence your actions without you knowing it. And so that's a key value that theoretical reflection can bring, to give you that external perspective.

Key Takeaways

- Career development theories can be useful for practitioners, for clients and for practice
- They can deepen our understanding of our clients, leading to more empathy and sharper questions, and can lead to insights for clients themselves
- They can boost our confidence in our own practice, and our professional credibility in others' eyes
- They can normalise and validate clients' own choices or experiences
- They can be used to guide practice, suggesting a direction for the conversation, an exercise to try or a framework for career education
- They can be used as a lens for reflective practice, allowing us to think more deeply about our clients and our choices.