Career Development Theories in Practice: A thematic analysis of practitioner perceptions of the benefits of theoretically informed practice

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Abstract

Career development theories can help practitioners to support their clients' career development, yet evidence suggests that they are not well used in practice. This study explores career practitioners' perceptions of the value that career development theories can add in guidance. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with thirty UK career practitioners exploring their perceptions of the benefits of theory-driven practice, and were analysed with a reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were developed: theories add value through boosting the confidence of client and practitioner, through deepening the understanding of client and practitioner, and through directly and indirectly improving career guidance conversations.

Keywords: career development theory; career practice; thematic analysis

Introduction

The career industry in the UK has struggled over the last decades to be seen as a credible profession. The Harris review in 2001 described careers services in Higher Education as 'Cinderella Services', a reference to a traditional fairy tale, in which the protagonist, and in this metaphor, the careers service practitioners, are depicted as hard-working employees not recognised for their contributions. Nearly a decade later, the UK government's Career Profession Task Force declared that career practitioners were not always seen as a 'highly-esteemed group of professionals' (2010, p.10) and called for increased professionalism, a message re-stated ten years later (Gough & Neary, 2020; Moore, 2021). This focus on further professionalisation in the career industry is not limited to the UK. O'Reilly and colleagues highlighted the challenge of 'social recognition' for the profession in Australia (O'Reilly, McMahon & Parker, 2020, p.84) and there have been recent calls for the further

professionalisation of the industry in countries such as Australia (O'Reilly et al., 2020) and Sweden (Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022).

At the heart of a profession is the 'development, transmission and application of a theoretical body of knowledge' (Victoria, 2018, p.1), and the aim of using this specialist knowledge to benefit society. There is no shortage of specialist theoretical knowledge in the discipline of career development, with hundreds of theories that explain and predict career choices and career paths. Theories are emphasised in professional frameworks (Career Development Institute, 2021) and in textbooks and papers (Reid, 2015; Yates, 2022), and are covered on initial training and continuing professional development (CPD) courses (OCR, 2021). But despite this centrality, it is not at all clear that the theories are well-used by career development practitioners. Polkinghorne, in 1992, identified a gap between theory and practice, and evidence suggests that there has not been a significant improvement since (Yates & Hirsh, 2024). Whilst a scientist-practitioner approach is gaining ground in some related professions, such as organisational psychology (Bulsara et al., 2021) and coaching (Miles & Fassinger, 2021), the career industry is not alone in its struggle to bridge theories and practice. In social work, for example, it is argued that professionals lack the time, the access and sometimes the critical thinking skills to interpret academic literature (Muurinen & Kaarlainen, 2021) and within HR, the academic research is criticised for being inaccessible and HR practitioners have been accused of oversimplifying the advice they give (Timmings & MacNeil, 2023). Given the recent interest in the professionalisation of the career development community, it seems timely to reflect on the role of career development theories in career practice, and this study aims to start to address this, exploring the contribution that career development theories can make.

Theories in career practice

Career practitioners draw on two groups of theories: counselling and guidance theories, and career development theories (Kidd et al., 1994, Perera & Athanasou, 2019, Sharf, 2014). Career counselling and guidance theories offer frameworks to help practitioners to manage and structure their

interventions. Common models include Egan's skilled helper model (2014) and Rogers's person-centred approach (1995).

Career development theories offer an explanation of the process of career choice and development. They provide a 'conceptual framework within which to view the types of career problems that emerge during a person's lifespan' (Sharf, 2010, p.4). A useful categorisation of these theories comes from Patton and McMahon (2014) who identify theories of content, theories of process, theories of content and process, and constructivist theories.

Theories of content focus on influences – both within the individual (for example Holland's trait and factor theory, 1973, or work as a calling theory, Duffy et al., 2018), and within the environment (for example Roberts' theory of opportunity structures, 1977 and Blustein et al.'s psychology of working theory, 2008). Theories of process address career development over time and include Super's theory of life stages (Super et al., 1996), Gati's work on career decision making (Gati & Asher, 2001) and Verbruggen and de Vos's career inaction theory (2018). Theories that combine process and content include Lent et al.'s social cognitive career theory (1994) and de Vos et al.'s sustainable career theory (2020). Constructivist theories acknowledge that careers are co-constructed between the individual and their context and include Pryor and Bright's chaos theory of careers (2003) and Savickas's career construction theory (2013).

Career practitioner trainees are exposed to both counselling theories and career development theories as part of their initial career practice training (Career Development Institute, 2021), but studies suggest whilst that career counselling and guidance theories are well used in practice, career development theories are not (Bimrose et al., 2016; Everitt et al., 2018; Kidd et al., 1994; Reardon et al., 2011; Yates & Hirsh, 2022). As such it is career development theories that are the focus of the present study.

Career development theories in career practice

Career development theories have the potential to add great value to practice. Theories are designed to simplify and explain, so the more complex the phenomenon, the more useful the theories; the complexity of career development is such that theories could have a great impact (Yates, 2022). Career development theories can be used in practice in different ways. They can help practitioners to conceptualise clients' career problems to help them understand what is going on for their clients, and identify a suitable direction for the conversation (Sharf, 2016). Theories can also be useful if directly shared with clients normalising their experiences and validating the choices that they have made (Yates, 2022). Some theories offer tools and techniques that practitioners can use: Savickas's theory of career construction (2013), for example, offers the career style interview to help identify life themes (Taber et al., 2011) and Career Inaction Theory offers specific suggestions for practice (Verbruggen & de Vos, 2018).

Existing research offers some detail of the career development theories that are most recognised and most often used by career practitioners. Brown, in a survey of US career practitioners in 2002 found that practitioners were most likely to use Holland's trait and factor theory (1973) and Super's life stages (1996). More recent research indicates that those two theories are popular in the UK, along with Roberts' theory of opportunity structures (1977), social learning theory (Krumboltz et al., 2009) and planned happenstance (Mitchell et al., 1996) (Everitt et al., 2018; Yates & Hirsh, 2022). There is limited evidence of more recent theories being used in practice and the reasons for this are not clear. New theories will of course take time to filter through to practice, but it might be reasonable to expect more significant shifts in the theories that are most often used. Another group of theories are rarely mentioned in research that examines practice, despite their prominence in the academic career literature; examples include Lent et al.'s social cognitive career theory (1994), Patton and McMahon's systems theory framework (2014) and Savickas's career construction theory (2013). Sharf notes that theories with three or four constructs are more likely to be useful than those which are more complex (2016) and perhaps the more comprehensive nature of these particular theories makes them less readily applicable.

More limited attention has been paid to how the theories are applied in practice, and less still to the perceived benefits of theoretical career practice. Brown's 2002 survey indicated that career development theories were used either through specific related assessment instruments or to help with case conceptualisation. Kidd et al. (1994) working with UK practitioners found that they used broad principles rather than applying the theories in a more specific way. Neither study examined the value that practitioners felt their use of theories added to their practice or to their clients.

Yates and Hirsh (2022) interviewed career practitioners in Higher Education in the UK and found that whilst they recognised the value of career development theories, they did not feel equipped to apply them in practice. Everitt et al. (2018) reported that very few of their practitioner participants drew on any career development theories in their practice, and Bimrose et al., (2016) described theoretical career practice as 'scarce' (p.147). Most striking, perhaps, is Kidd et al.'s conclusion that their career practitioner participants were 'virtually unanimous in their dismissal of the value of theories' (1994, p.391).

Explanations have been put forward to explain the limited use of career development theories in practice. Some authors suggest that the problem may lie in the nature of the theories, which may not be suitable for a contemporary context (Lauder & Neary, 2020; Matthews, 2017). Others critique the way theories are taught, highlighting that theory and practice are usually covered as distinct topics (Brown, 2002; Kidd et al., 1994) and the fact that many of those who write about and teach career theories are not themselves career practitioners (Lenz, 2008). There is some evidence that practitioners do not see learning about career theories as paramount (Athanasou, 2012), and some studies suggest that the careers service context in the UK, in particular the culture of short one-off interventions might make the application of theories more difficult (Reid, 2022).

The reality may well be that the reasons are complex and incorporate all of these, but notwithstanding the intractability of these challenges, they must be addressed. Without the transmission and application of these theories, the career development community is failing to fulfil

its potential, failing its clients, and will continue to fall short of its desired professional status (Tapper & Millett, 2015; Sampson et al., 2011).

In this study we aim to address the topic in a new way, evoking the solution-focused philosophy that holds that solutions are not found in problems, but in exceptions and resources (de Shazer & Berg, 1995). Rather than concentrating on the barriers, the focus of this study is existing good practice in the field, and the study aims to explicate the benefits of using theories and identify enablers. The expectation is that this positive approach could yield some compelling reasons for using theories in career practice, and illustrate how they are used and how they are learned. A clear description of both the value that theories add and the ways that they are used could help to convince practitioners of the value of engaging with theories, and offer career practitioner trainers and professional bodies ideas for initial training and continuous professional development.

The participants for this study are career practitioners who use career development theories in their practice. Through in-depth interviews with 30 practitioners, this study will explore how practitioners use theories and what value they feel the theories add to their practice. Specifically, the research question focuses on career practitioners who incorporate career development theories in their practice and asks: What benefits do practitioners see from their theoretically-informed practice?

Method

This study is underpinned by critical realism which aligns a realist ontology with a relativist epistemology, proposing that whilst there is an objective reality, it can only be seen through the lens of individuals' experiences and understood through the meaning they make of those experiences (Bhaksar, 2020; Willig, 2013). In this study, it is therefore assumed that using career theories in practice can have an impact, but that this impact can only be understood through the lens of people's experiences – in this case drawing on the perceptions of the career practitioners. Critical realism focuses on explicit meanings within the data, reporting the reality of the participants' experiences as described in their narratives. The study offers an inductive analysis, providing a rich

account of the participants' experiences, exploring the topic, and not aiming to fit the data into a pre-existing theoretical framework.

Researcher perspective

As a career coach and academic who teaches career coaching to entry level trainees and to experienced professionals in the UK, I have a long standing and deep interest in improving career practice. My interest in the topic of this research was sparked off by conversations with students and career practitioners which revealed a wide range of attitudes towards and approaches to theory-driven practice, and led to a genuine curiosity on my part to learn more about the way practitioners use theories, the theories they use and the benefits they perceive. This enthusiasm for identifying good practice risked a positive bias during both the data gathering and the analysis stage. To mitigate against bias during data collection, the interview questions were kept deliberately open and neutral, so as to avoid leading the participants. During the analysis I remained acutely aware of the risks of bias and committed to keeping the coding and development of themes closely grounded in the data. The initial findings were then shared with four of the participants who reported that they felt that the analysis resonated with their experiences, and the account of the findings in this paper are well illustrated with direct quotes from the participants.

UK Context

The career development industry in the UK operates on a devolved model with separate organisations determining policy and provision in each of the four nations. The Scottish Development Service provides all age support through educational institutions and the community. Career Wales provides support for young people and adults whose jobs are at risk or who are unemployed. The Northern Ireland Careers Service provides all age guidance. There is no single body overseeing provision in England leading to a more fragmented service offering different levels of support to young people through schools and universities and to adults in particular priority groups across the country. Whilst the provision of career support across the UK varies, the Career

Development Institute, the dominant professional body, supports and accredits the initial training of career practitioners across the country and offers a wide range of continuing professional development for practitioners.

Participants

Participants were 30 UK career practitioners (m=7, f=23) who self-identified as using theories in their career practice. The participants came from across the career industry, working (either at the time of the study or in previous roles) with clients in schools (n=13), further education colleges (n=8), higher education (n=19) and with adults (n=12); 16 of the practitioners had experience working with more than one client group. All participants were trained and qualified: 14 participants qualified with a post-graduate diploma in career development, 14 had been awarded a Masters qualification in career development, and three had National Vocational Qualification in advice and guidance – two at level 6 (equivalent to the final year of an undergraduate degree programme) and one at level 4 (equivalent to the first year of a degree programme). The practitioners' qualifications had been awarded between 41 years and 2 months prior to the interviews, (mean=15.6 years, sd=12.6). There were no discernible patterns in the participants' responses based on type of qualification or length of time since qualification. Some differences emerged on the basis of client group which are discussed in the Findings section. Further details of the participants can be seen in Table S1 in the supplementary file.

Sample size in qualitative studies can be difficult to determine and to justify. The present study was exploratory but had a narrow aim, and highly specific participant characteristics; an information power analysis would suggest that a medium sized sample would be sufficient for such a study (Malterud et al., 2016), and 30 participants is within the recommended sample size (Clarke & Braun, 2017) and well within the range used in similar recent studies (for example Sharma et al., 2021; Yates & Hirshi, 2022) and thus was considered suitable for the study.

Procedure

Once ethical approval was granted from X University Psychology Ethics Committee (approval number xxx) *[blinded for review],* the researcher posted a message on two professional social media groups. The message invited practitioners who use career development theories in their practice and who find that this theoretically informed practice adds value to get in touch with the author. Fifteen practitioners responded to a message posted on the researcher's LinkedIn page and a further seven responded to a message posted on X (formerly Twitter). The remaining participants were recruited through snowball sampling, with six of the first set of 22 participants inviting suitable colleagues to contact the researcher. There was no discernible impact of the sampling method in the findings.

Data Collection

Interviews took place on MS Teams between December 2021 and June 2022 and were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and pseudonymised. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 75 minutes and averaged 52 minutes long. The interviews were semi-structured – designed to gather the data needed to answer the research questions, but with enough flexibility to ensure that the researcher was able to follow the conversation in any unexpected but potentially valuable direction. The participants were asked to describe their theoretical practice 'Tell me a bit about how you use theories in your practice' and to explain 'What value do you think the theories add?'. Prompt questions ensured that participants had considered all aspects of their practice, and that they were given the opportunity to offer a range of examples from their work. Participants were also asked to comment on their theoretical training and development and the range of theories they draw on. The full set of questions asked can be found in the supplementary file.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's approach to reflective thematic analysis (RTA) (2020). This approach aims to identify patterns of data across a data set, identifying common themes that answer the research question. RTA is a method of data analysis that can suit a range of epistemological positions, here being used within a critical realist framework. It is an approach that

acknowledges researcher subjectivity as a resource and thus is recommended for single-coder research. I followed Braun et al.'s specific steps for data analysis (2006, 2020). I became familiar with the data, reading the transcripts through and then coded the entire data set, working through line by line and giving participants' comments descriptive codes that reflected my understanding of their meaning. In vivo code labels were used where possible, to try and represent the participants' meanings as faithfully as possible (including *'credibility as a career coach', 'bring the insides outside'* and *'affirmation'*). In an RTA, coding is an organic process which makes no use of codebooks and does not strive for accuracy or reliability. The process of analysis is iterative and slow, and the time and space required allows the research to develop a deeper and more nuanced analysis (Braun et al., 2019). The participant narratives in this study were in some ways quite diverse, as the participants were working with different clients in different contexts, and each practitioner offered specific examples of the way they worked with theories. This heterogeneity encouraged me to delve deeper with my analysis, as the patterns of meaning came from what was behind the examples, rather than the examples themselves and this helped me to avoid what Braun and Clarke call topic summaries, which are more descriptive (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Working with the codes from the whole data set, I then began to develop themes – identifying codes that were similar and grouping them together, reflecting on the relationships between the codes and developing themes. The way that I grouped the codes into themes developed over time. In my initial analysis I developed two themes, identifying the benefits of theory-drive practice for 1) practitioners and 2) practice. *Benefits for practitioners* included codes linked to increased credibility and increased confidence. *Benefits for practice* included codes that covered the way that theories can normalise and validate clients' experiences, and the way they can inform questions. This analysis did seem to fit the data, as I interpreted it, but didn't seem to offer a sufficiently deep analysis. With further thought and reflection, I developed the final themes (*greater confidence, deeper understanding* and *more effective practice*) and felt that this offered a deeper level of analysis, explaining not just how the theories can be used, but what they can achieve. This final analysis,

evoking Beck's cognitive triangle of emotions, cognitions and actions (Beck, 1995), seemed to me to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the value of theories, and to be faithful to the data.

Throughout the process I aimed to stay as close to the data as possible, identifying quotes from the participants' narratives that could illustrate the themes, and I kept coming back to the research question to ensure that the final model of themes offered the best and most faithful answer.

With a RTA, researchers are encouraged to use their subjectivity as a resource, as a tool to help them to deepen their analysis and to support knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To this end, I kept a detailed reflective journal throughout, noting down and questioning my own pre-understanding of the issues, and their responses, feelings, and ideas generated across the whole process to allow me to offer a deeper level of analysis (Sundler et al., 2019).

Findings and Discussion

The practitioners were asked which theories they used in their practice and altogether mentioned 33 different theories. Seventeen of the theories were discussed by multiple practitioners and sixteen were mentioned by one individual practitioner. Practitioners predominately drew on the traditional theories, focusing on a fairly narrow range of well-established career development theories, most commonly Mitchell et al.'s theory of planned happenstance (1999), Holland's trait and factor theory (1973), Law's theory of community interaction (1981) and Roberts' theory of opportunity structures (1977). There were fewer references to theories developed this century (exceptions included Ng & Feldman's theory of occupational embeddedness, 2009 and Savickas's theory of career construction, 2013) and just one from the past decade (Tomlinson's graduate capital model, 2017). Table S2 in the supplementary file provides a full list.

The range of traditional theories recalls the theories most commonly used in Kidd et al.'s study in the UK (1994) and Brown's in the US (2002), and highlights the enduring dominance of Holland's trait and factor theory and Super's theory of Life Stages. Mitchell et al.'s theory of planned happenstance

(1999), was noted by the highest number of practitioners, with 19 using it in their practice echoing the findings from two more recent surveys of practice in the UK (Everitt et al., 2018; Yates & Hirsh, 2022). Participants here explained that they shared the concept of planned happenstance explicitly with their clients and found that it helped their clients to, in David's words, *'feel better'*.

Unexpectedly, these findings suggest that the leading 20th century theories, identified in previous studies both in the UK and the US, still dominate in practice. The context in which practitioners are working, and the labour market that their clients are entering have both changed significantly over the last decades (Neary & Thambar, 2020; Savickas, 2011). The myriad career development theories, which have emerged in response to these changes, would seem to be far more relevant to a contemporary context, yet they do not appear to have been widely adopted. Older theories are criticised for their assumptions about the static nature of people and jobs and their limited acknowledgement of the experiences of diverse groups (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Patton & McMahon, 2014; Yates, 2022), so the limited use of more recent theories in this study is arguably a cause for concern. Given that modern theories are arguably more suited to supporting clients to navigate career development in the contemporary world, what explanations can there be for the persistent popularity of the older theories?

Most of the practitioners had received their initial training before 2010 and would have learnt about the more traditional theories at that stage. Some of the participants, however, had trained more recently, and still did not describe using the newer theories much in their practice. Further research could identify the range of theories that are covered on initial training programmes and in continuing professional development in the UK to explore whether the limited range of theories identified in this study is a consequence of the approach to training.

Another possible explanation is offered by the participants who explained that some of the more recent theories were difficult to understand and apply. Steve, commenting on systems theory framework (Patton & McMahon, 2014) said *'I can see what they are trying to do with it, but how do*

you even use that as a practitioner?' and Alex, recalling Savickas's career construction theory (2013) said *'I kept reading it and reading it and it still made no sense'.* This aligns with Sharf's suggestion that complicated theories are hard to use (2016), and echoing calls from Lauder and Neary (2021) and Matthews (2017), a renewed focus on how theories are communicated might be timely.

Three key themes reflect three different ways in which career theories can enhance career practice: greater confidence, deeper understanding, and more effective practice.

Theme 1: Knowledge of career theories leads to greater confidence.

The participants showed that a knowledge of career theories leads to greater confidence, both for themselves and for their clients. For practitioners, knowing about theories can enhance their sense of professionalism and boost their credibility with others. Those who share theories explicitly with clients, reported that learning about a theory can validate and normalise clients' experiences.

Theories enhance professional credibility

Some practitioners reported that using theories had a positive impact on their credibility with their clients and making clients more confident in the practitioner's professional knowledge and practices. Ruth explained that using theories *'demonstrates my credibility as a career coach'* and Nicky explained that for her, *'credibility comes from the theories on which you base your practice'.*

Practitioners also spoke about other stakeholders. Katrina, who works in a university explained that *'it boosts my credibility significantly to use research and theories with academics because that's at the heart of what is valued'* and Carole echoed this, saying that *'you have to justify that the work you are doing is not airy fairy nonsense'.* Practitioners also reported that using theories specifically increases the status of their job-role. Becky explained that acknowledging a theoretical underpinning makes the point that '*not everyone is a careers adviser'* and Susan in a similar vein said that it shows that '*it's not easy to become a career consultant*'.

The practitioners spoke about the positive impact that understanding theories can have on their own sense of professionalism. Tessa explained, theories '*make me feel I have more of a professional identity*', Maddie spoke about the *'legitimacy'* theories bring, and Steve said: *'I am an expert here'*.

The ability to boost confidence is a particularly interesting finding in this study. It is not inherent in the nature of theories to have impact of this nature and is not something that has been identified in previous studies that have examined the use of career development theories in career practice, yet the use of theories appears to be a potent source of professional credibility for these practitioners. The practitioners explained that they felt more confident about their profession and their professionalism through understanding the theoretical underpinning to their work and, echoing definitions of professionalism in the literature (Victoria, 2018), they described this as an important element of their professional identity. A professional identity – a particularly prestigious kind of occupational identity which makes use of esoteric skills and knowledge (Lepisto et al., 2015) can help individuals to find purpose and meaning, and to see how they make a contribution to society (Caza & Creary, 2016). The participants described the association between their knowledge of theories and their own professional identity in strong terms, suggesting an almost existential need for the additional standing that a theoretical basis can add. A strong professional identity brings individual benefits, boosting self-esteem and job satisfaction (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994), but could also make a positive contribution at a broader level. The strength of the impact that a familiarity with the underpinning theory had on the participants' professional identities chimes with a profession that has been struggling to increase its status (Gough & Neary, 2020); a deeper engagement with theory may constitute a useful approach to dealing with this long running issue.

Knowledge of theories boosts practitioners' confidence in what they do. Christine talked about the reassurance the theories offered, saying that they *'affirm that I'm already doing and thinking the right things'* and Ruth explained that her knowledge about theories is *'to some degree a confidence booster – to reassure me that I know what I'm doing'.*

The affirmation that an understanding of theories gave to the practitioners in terms of their own practices too may have some more direct positive impact for practitioners. Professional self-efficacy has been shown to confer a range of benefits, increasing psycho-social wellbeing (Ventura et al., 2015), commitment to a profession (Chesnut & Burley, 2015), the ability to deal with set backs and to embrace challenges (Staples et al., 1999) and job satisfaction (Caprara et al., 2006). Ayliffe et al., (2024) explain that a theoretically-informed employability curriculum can lead to more effective learning, as it can give practitioners the confidence to raise their expectations of what the students can achieve and to challenge them more.

Engaging with theories boosts clients' confidence

Most of the practitioners said that they sometimes explicitly share details of a theory with their clients, and reported that this can be validating, making clients feel more confident about the choices that they have made. David talked about students *'physically relaxing'* when they realise that there is a theory which explains their own experiences and Jasmine recounted an interaction with a client in which she described a relevant theory, saying *'I saw that little smile come on his face – he liked that, knowing that he fitted into a theory […] it gives them a bit of affirmation'.*

A similar but distinct value that learning theories can confer on clients is that, in Rosalind's words, they *'normalise clients' experiences'*. For clients who feel that they have made mistakes with their career choices, or fear that they have fallen behind their peers, learning about a theory which reflects their experience or explains their current situation can normalise what they have been through. Penny explained that clients will '*often think they are the only one'* and explained that knowing there was a theory that accounted for their situation can make them feel *'they're not alone'.* The practitioners also noticed that learning about a theory made their clients feel empowered. Lee explained that clients can think that *'careers just happen'* and learning about theories *'empowers them, gives them some agency,'* giving clients, as Maddie said, the '*drive to take control'* of their own futures.

The idea that theories can normalise and validate clients' experiences echoes the advice from Yates (2022) and the boost to confidence that it seems to confer may have very positive benefits on clients' career development (Hirschi, 2014). The idea of empowerment and agency too are important for career development (Blustein et al., 2008) and offering clients tools that they can use beyond the career conversation itself is of great value (Fleuren et al., 2020). Career development theories may therefore have a very positive, direct impact on clients' career decision making.

Alex reported that her year 11 pupils would be more likely to put their theory-inspired plans into action, feeling *'more confident'* about their value and therefore their own *'chances of success'*. This echoes the findings of Ayliffe et al. (2024) who found that their theory-driven employability sessions gave students the confidence to override pressure from friends or anecdotal evidence.

Theme 2: Knowledge of career theories leads to deeper understanding.

The second theme was the role that theories play in deepening understanding. Again, this offered value for the career practitioners, leading to a deeper understanding of their clients, and for clients themselves, allowing them to unlock insights.

Deeper understanding of clients

Every practitioner talked about theories as a mechanism to help them to understand their clients better. David stated that for him, theories *'give you insight into what's happening with the student; they help with understand where they're at and how things around them are influencing their decision making and their ideas'.* Catherine said that her knowledge of theories allowed her *'to understand the complexity'* and illustrated this talking about a hypothetical client who wanted to be a lawyer, explaining:

> *'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).' (Catherine)*

Echoing advice in the literature (for example, Sharf, 2016) Catherine's example shows how she was able to draw on a range of different theories, picking those that were most suitable for the client in front of her and using them to help her to look behind the client's words to understand some of the complexity. Previous studies have indicated that career theories may only be useable in longer career conversations (Reid, 2022), but this quote from Catherine illustrates how theories can be used to delve deep quickly, suggesting that rather than being something that takes time within a career conversation, theoretical knowledge can serve as a short cut.

Deeper self-awareness for clients

Practitioners explained that when they were able to share a relevant theory, clients were able to use the theory as a framework or lens through which to understand their own thoughts or emotions better. Karen felt that it often leads to *'lightbulb moments'* for clients and Ruth spoke about using theories as a way to challenge clients' thinking – exposing *'blind spots'.* Alex saw theories as ways to help clients to '*bringing the insides outside – bring out what is already in their heads'.*

Self-awareness is at the heart of good quality career decision making (Law & Watts, 1977) and has been identified as one of the aspects of the process that those making choices find most difficult (Gati et al., 1996). The examples above illustrate the potential value of sharing theories with clients and yet even our highly theoretically-aware participants were not always keen to do so. Whilst some, particularly those working with students and researchers in Higher Education, were comfortable sharing the details of the theoretical basis of their sessions with their clients, others were more hesitant. Carole explained *'I don't talk to the clients about specific theories'* and Steve simply said that his clients *'wouldn't need to know'* details about the name or authors of the theory. Career theories themselves can be complicated and difficult to grasp and perhaps this is one factor that makes is difficult for practitioners to share theories explicitly with clients. Brown (2002) reported that career practitioners wanted theories that were clearly and simply expressed, and some of the practitioners in this study also noted how rarely they found simple explanations of

career theories: Marina explained that to really understand the academic literature *'I had to read it so many times to get my head round it'*.

Theme 3: Knowledge of career theories leads to more effective practice

The practitioners spoke about the ways in which theories influenced their career conversations, and the indirect influence the theories had on their conversations, through deeper understanding.

Enhancing the relationship

Existing literature has repeatedly shown that the quality of the relationship between the client and the practitioner has a positive impact on the outcomes of the intervention. It is often cited as the single most important aspect of the interaction (Grassman, 2020; Whiston et al., 2017), and experiencing and communicating empathy with clients is one of Rogers' core conditions for effective practice (1961). It seems that theories can be useful tools to help this.

The practitioners explained that the deeper understanding of their clients, developed through their theoretical knowledge allowed them, as Nancy said *'to understand and empathise more'.* Freya talked about it leading to '*deeper empathy'* and greater *'unconditional positive regard'* for her clients and Ben felt it meant that he was able to say *'I recognise that'* to his clients, illustrating that this understanding leads both to more empathy and the communication of that empathy. Again, the narratives from this study illustrate that a knowledge of theories can offer a short cut to effective practice, allowing practitioners to develop deeper relationships more quickly.

Jasmine and Beatriz both explained that using theories can make the process be more of a *'collaboration'* between the coach and client, invoking, as Alex said, '*a third party'* whose work they can critique together. Ellen described sharing the names of the scholars and theories so that clients *'can go away and research themselves if they want to'*, guarding against a power imbalance in the relationship, by sharing their expertise and inviting the client to embrace, reject or critique the ideas.

This collaborative working relationship is a goal of good career practice (Whiston et al., 2017) and it seems that using theories is one mechanism for achieving this. Sharing theories allows practitioners to add value through specialist knowledge, without disrupting the collaborative nature of the relationship, or putting the practitioner in a position of expert, which can risk removing agency from the client (Hawkins, 2014).

Improving the conversation

The practitioners talked about using this deeper knowledge to guide their actions within the career conversation, as Rosalind said, it helps her *'to work out what we need to work on'.* Catherine sees an improvement in the way she listens, explaining that her knowledge of theories lets her *'listen in a deep way […] which allows you to have a better and deeper conversation about it'.* George said that the better understanding he has developed through their theoretical knowledge, allows him to *'ask the right questions'* and Leila spoke about her deeper understanding making her questions *'sharper and cleverer'.*

For other practitioners, theories offer some guidance as to the direction of conversation. Ben uses his knowledge of theories to develop a *'working hypothesis'* about his clients which *'gives me some ideas about what to do next – what questions to ask, what direction to take the conversation and some ideas for solving the problems'.* Rosalind felt that they could add some '*shape and structure'* to her conversations and Nicky went as far as to say that the theory-driven structure offers *'transforms it from a chat to a useful workshop'.*

The skills described here are some of the most important that a practitioner will use in their practice. Textbooks and courses offer ideas for improving listening skills, asking powerful questions (Ali & Graham, 1996), and it is interesting to see that career theories can stimulate these important skills.

Supporting professional skills

Some practitioners, including Catherine and Freya used theories as a mechanism through which, in Caitlin's words *'to reflect on practice and improve it'*. Reflective practice is an important part of

professional development (CDI, 2021), that serves to improve practice, support ethical practice and increase self-awareness (Carroll, 2009; McMahon, 2004). Using theories to help structure these reflections seems to support this important aspect of professional practice.

A few of the participants also saw that through this reflection, theories could lead to what Ben described as *'self-compassion'.* He explained that *'they can make you understand that something isn't down to you – it's just where the client is'.* Freya spoke in a similar vein about theories making her more resilient, explaining that they can *'give you comfort and a bit of hope when things go wrong'* as they allow her to see that a lack of progress with a client is just part of a process, and not down to her professional failings. She finds that this makes her more resilient, allowing her to '*feel better about the small steps and the small impact'.* Self-compassion, the process of noticing inner pain and identifying it as a normal part of human experience and making a choice to be kind to oneself, has been established as an antecedent of resilience (Lefebvre et al., 2020) and a valuable way to help workers cope with stressful contexts (Finlay-Jones et al., 2017)

A small number of the practitioners spoke about theory as the fundamental bedrock of their entire work. Beatriz explained that theories have given her *'my philosophical understanding of how careers work – of what career development is'.* Christine explained that the theories inform *'how I understand what career choice is'* and Alex said that her knowledge of theories '*shapes me as a practitioner - my views, it shapes everything'* adding '*I don't really understand how people can work in careers without theory'.* Susan spoke passionately about the importance of theories in careers work, explaining that *'theories deepen what we do'* and Rosalind asserted '*You have to have some kind of foothold in theory and research: without that we would not be doing our jobs*'.

This is an interesting and unexpected sub-theme. It seems that theories can help practitioners to crystalise and articulate what they are doing, why they are doing it and how they can do it well.

It was notable that the practitioners in this study reported making better use of older theories – mostly those published in the 20th century. It seems plausible that incorporating newer theories,

which are more relevant to current labour markets and practices, and which acknowledge the experiences of a wider range of clients, could have an even more positive impact.

Learning to use theories

The participants were asked to talk about how they learned about theories and how to use them in practice. They generally felt that they had been introduced to career theories well on their initial training courses, with the best experiences involving training or assignments which brought the theories to life for them, as Carole said *'helping them to see the connection between the theories and their own lives'*. Their experiences of theory in CPD were less fruitful, with the practitioners reporting that they had sought out and learnt about theories independently, as they had been aware of few formal opportunities to expand their knowledge. Perhaps more shocking was the dominant message, that, as Nicky said, *'we were never taught to use the theories in practice'*. Tessa recalls leaving her MA course thinking *'well I've learned this stuff, but I don't know how I'm going to use any of it'*. They noted that the theory classes were separate from the practical classes, and each participant spoke about having worked out, for themselves, how to apply the theories in their practice. It seems that the problem does not necessarily lie in how theories are taught, but in how practice is taught. Kidd et al. in 1994 identified the problem with teaching theories and practice separately, and we see with these practitioners, some of whom are only very recently qualified, that this problem has not yet been addressed.

This study was conducted in the UK, but there is reason to think that the findings could be relevant elsewhere. The benefits identified in this study are not theory-specific but rather relate to the nature of theory, its explanatory power and its associations with the professions, indicating perhaps that theoretically-driven career practice could bring benefits with a range of theories, in a range of different contexts.

Implications for practice

In contrast to the messages from previous research (Everitt et al., 2018; Reid, 2021) the present study shows that it is quite possible to use theories in the current UK context and identifies a range of benefits from a more theoretical practice. The findings do however highlight some challenges that need to be addressed. Specific recommendations are:

- Professional bodies need to redouble their efforts to emphasise the value of theories through conference input, training and prominent, fairly priced, or free online resources.
- More post-qualification training should explicitly focus on the application of theories and in practice, with regular CPD courses promoted to the careers community.
- Initial training providers need to bridge the gap between theories and practice, explicitly teaching students how to use theories in practice and how practice can encompass theories. This could be supported by relevant assessments where trainees demonstrate the use of theories in practice, and guidelines and scrutiny from accrediting boards.
- Further resources could be produced which describe theories in accessible language and which offer practical ideas for their application, for example bite sized online CPD and practitioner orientated written resources. These should be accessible in terms of cost and should be focused on the practical application of theories.
- Other professions, including some branches of psychology (for example occupational, coaching and counselling psychology) seem to be more adept at incorporating theories into their practice and it may be that there are lessons the careers profession could learn about how this is managed elsewhere.

Limitations and directions for future research

The participants in this study self-selected, and are therefore not representative of the population but as the aim of the study was to explore theory-driven practice, the lack of representation was not considered problematic. More relevant is that the participants were relying on their own recollections of their practice, so their claims of adding value to their clients cannot be objectively

verified; further exploration of the clients' perspectives would be beneficial. An intervention study, offering some theory-based practice training and examining the impact this has on practitioners and practice would be a useful next step. The data were analysed by a single researcher, resulting in themes that are highly influenced by this researcher's perspective; further research from a different perspective would enrich our collective understanding of the topic. The data were all collected in the UK, from participants who practiced in the UK. As highlighted above, there is reason to feel that there could be similar benefits seen with practitioners in other countries, but it would be useful to replicate this study internationally to see whether similar themes would be seen elsewhere.

Conclusion

Career development theories can be highly useful to career practice, adding value to clients in various direct and indirect ways. The findings show that theories can be used in a wide range of contexts and can offer increased confidence, deeper understanding and more effective practice. Their application may also have the potential to make a significant impact on the status of the profession, re-educating stakeholders and demonstrating the specialist expertise of practitioners, and could also enhance the status of the profession indirectly through improving practice. However, further support must be given to practitioners, who need explicit training on how to apply the theories in practice, both on initial training courses, and in post-qualification professional development. Theory-driven practice is at the heart of professionalism and the career development community must redouble its efforts to enable and embrace this, in order to fulfil its fundamental purpose and contribute fully to individuals and to society.

Conflict of Interest Statement

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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