

Chapter 37

Action Theory: An Integrative Paradigm for Research and Evaluation in Career



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Abstract In this chapter, action theory is proposed and illustrated as a paradigm for research and evaluation in educational and vocational guidance. Action theory reflects the common experience that people understand their own and others' behaviours as goal-directed. Contextual action theory provides the basis for linking action and career. This paradigm allows researchers to address issues of quality educational and vocational guidance research by proposing a framework in which understanding the goals, internal and social processes, and the behaviours that compose action, and by extension career, is enhanced. Specific research methods applicable to career guidance include identifying action as the unit of analysis, data gathering procedures, and data analysis. The application of the paradigm to counselling as one of the primary processes in career guidance is used to illustrate the usefulness of the action theory paradigm in research in this field.

Keywords Action · Paradigm · Project · Evaluation · Method · Practice

This chapter is situated in a section of the *Handbook of Career Guidance* entitled “evaluation of educational and vocational guidance.” The authors of the adjacent chapters address topics such as the evaluation of programmes and person-centred approaches to career development. The evaluation of career counselling programmes is a well-established practice (Whiston et al. 2017). In this contribution, the choice was made to take up this important issue from a different perspective. It is the intention to present a paradigm or model in which the evaluation of educational and vocational guidance can be understood and practised.

The notion of a paradigm is important in career research and evaluation because it answers the “why” question of any investigation. In this way, career research and evaluation can represent a well-reasoned process, not merely a routine institutional response. The title of this chapter specifies an integrative paradigm. Educational and

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vocational guidance, and the larger domain of career of which they are a part, are complicated and complex phenomena. One-off and isolated studies can answer specific questions, but frequently do not address the larger picture. A framework or paradigm is needed in order to integrate knowledge from specific research and evaluation studies.

Any kind of evaluation is guided by two sets of beliefs, whether tacit or explicit (Kellaghan and Stufflebeam 2003). One set of beliefs is about the content area, that is, what the evaluators believe about canned vegetables, learning French, or, in the case of this chapter, educational and vocational guidance. The authors of the chapters of this *Handbook* have delineated a rich range of beliefs about educational and vocational guidance and career. These beliefs are themselves based on research, evaluation, anecdotal practice, and conceptual frameworks. The second set of beliefs that guide evaluation includes those beliefs about the processes of research and evaluation and what these processes are intended to accomplish.

In most cases, the congruence between beliefs about the content and the evaluation process is assumed, but not well examined. In some cases, however, the degree of discontinuity between these beliefs raises impediments for conducting evaluation and research and for understanding and acting on their findings. Beliefs about evaluation are frequently guided by practical issues, such as, what are the goals of the evaluation, what questions need to be answered, how should data be analysed and presented, what meaning will the findings have? These are questions that reflect one's understanding of the content domain. Although touched on only briefly here, these issues are very substantial. When not well reflected in studies, the research or evaluation can lead to unintended consequences in educational policy and programmes, and in educational and vocational guidance practice.

An integrative framework for the evaluation of educational and vocational guidance has to enable evaluators to identify processes and outcomes. It also should be broad enough to capture the four levels of career explanation Savickas (2002) identified, that is, dispositions, concerns, narratives, and processes. The framework must also speak to practice, research, and theory. The challenge of meeting these criteria is significant. The contextual action theory of career (Young et al. 2002, 2015a) goes far to meet this challenge. However, this challenge is not fully met by simply identifying the factors and their relationships at play in an integrative framework for educational and vocational guidance. How these factors work together to form a life-enhancing career that, in turn, can be the basis for evaluation is discussed in this chapter.

As the title suggests, this chapter also seeks to integrate research and evaluation in educational and vocational guidance. In common usage, research is the superordinate term that refers to a "systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2005, Code of Federal Regulations, 46.102(d), p. 118). Evaluation is generally understood as determining the worth of something, usually a programme; for example, a programme intended to assist people to re-enter paid employment

after a period of absence is appraised by its outcomes. Evaluation can also refer to the evaluation of a person, as in a self-evaluation or the evaluation of a client in an educational or vocational guidance programme. It is important to signal a caution here that to limit evaluation to determining the worth of an outcome may be to significantly constrict the nature of educational and vocational guidance. Minimally, researchers and programme evaluators should be interested in processes as well (Young and Valach 2009). But another critical question is whether educational and vocational guidance should be limited to technical knowledge and practice, although in many cases it is. In this contribution it is maintained, however, that educational and vocational guidance is more than technical competence that can be subsumed simply by the evaluation of outcomes. Previously, the authors asserted that career and career decision making were fundamentally moral and socio-cultural undertakings (Young et al. 2007a; Young and Valach 2004). Thus, the paradigm should go beyond technical knowledge by acknowledging a hermeneutic dialogue, in Taylor's (1989) sense, that is not readily bounded by language, history, or culture.

Research in the sense of generating new knowledge is a goal that has, in the canon of traditional science, stood outside the criterion of worth. It has been associated with natural phenomena. It is mostly related to "what is". Knowledge was seen as a worthwhile goal in itself, and often separated from the social, political, and economic context. In contrast, the definition of evaluation implies judging quality in light of criteria. It is associated with the traditional notion of *qualia* (Chumley 2013), where no amount of information about the phenomenon itself suffices for knowledge. These two domains developed separately and it took some time until evaluation was discussed as a legitimate process in research and until research methods were introduced into evaluation. The critical feature of an integrative paradigm for research and evaluation in career is one in which aspects of consciousness and natural phenomena are considered together. Intentionality, the construct that is central to the paradigm proposed in this chapter, implicitly joins natural phenomena to goals and thereby to worth. Thus, the proposed paradigm is integrative in bringing natural phenomena and *qualia* together, and thus linking research and evaluation. Intentionality also serves to integrate *noema* and *noesis*, that is, an experienced phenomenon and its mode of being experienced (Sharoff 1995). These steps listed here in a telegraphic manner took a long time to develop in the philosophy of science and are still only seldom encountered in educational and vocational guidance research and evaluation.

This chapter begins with an overview of action theory as an explanation of career. This paradigm is then illustrated by applying it to the issue of what constitutes a life-enhancing career, under the assumption that educational and vocational guidance is ultimately directed at facilitating such careers. How the paradigm is applied to research and evaluation in career is discussed with reference to what it allows researchers, programme evaluators, and counsellors to do; the procedures for its use in research and evaluation are provided. In addition, its use in counselling, one of the primary means of educational and vocational guidance, is described.

The Contextual Action Theoretical Paradigm

Consider the client in an educational and vocational guidance programme. This hypothetical client reflects an image of person, who can understand the aims and goals of other people, draw them into his or her goals, and join them in actions and projects in such a way that several important goals are achieved. The tasks and personal issues that the client is involved in alone or with others point toward these goals. The client can perform actions, not disturbed or inhibited by traumatic emotional memories. He or she can work on projects and is skilled in participating in them, that is, the client reflects and responds to social and cognitive-emotional issues, and how a project may be organised. At the same time, he or she maintains personal goals while engaging in the project. The client has a sense and appreciation of life coherence and meaning identified in terms of goals, including those that have been achieved and to be achieved. The client also understands how these goals are organised across time. He or she also has a sense of happiness and being appreciated by others.

The optimal processes described above should be addressed, understood, and supported in life generally. Moreover, they should be specifically fostered in career guidance programmes. The assumptions that undergird this scenario have recently been addressed and discussed by various professionals, often in terms of positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 2006; Ivztan et al. 2016; Peterson 2013; Snyder and Lopez 2009). Contextual action theory provides a conceptual framework or paradigm for understanding these processes.

The contextual action theory of career is based on the notion that the common experience of people, both within educational and vocational guidance programmes and in their lives more generally, is that their own and other people's behaviours are understood as goal-directed actions (Young et al. 2002, 2015a). This framework for how people understand and make sense of human behaviour looks to the goals of action and other action processes rather than the causes of behaviour for understanding. It posits a significant link between action, project, and career. *Action* refers to the intentional goal-directed behaviour of persons. When several discrete actions that occur over a mid-length period of time are constructed as having common goals we consider them a *project*. Finally, when projects coalesce over a long period of time and have a significant place in one's life, then we can speak of *career*.

In addition to being goal-directed, action is cognitively steered and regulated, that is, as people act, they steer that action based on their thoughts and feelings. Action is also socially influenced. In the case of joint actions, the steering and regulation of action reflects communicative as well as internal processes. Finally, action is also represented in specific conscious and unconscious behaviours that the person uses in engaging in the action.

The action theoretical paradigm proposed here has a significant social dimension. By conceptually linking action, project and career, we have already moved beyond the idea of the individual—whether considered from the perspective of per-

sonality traits or individual decisional processes—to ideas of joint action and the embedding of actions in socially constructed projects and careers (Valach et al. 2002b). The intentionality that was mentioned before reflects, at one level, the individual intentions of the actors that they both bring to and that are generated within actions. It can also be agreed with Shotter (1993) that joint action captures intentionality that is not fully accounted for by the participants' individual intentions.

This paradigm suggests a definition of career that differs from many definitions of this term. Essentially, career can be defined as “a superordinate construct that allows people to construct connections among actions, to account for effort, plans, goals, and consequences, to frame internal cognitions and emotions, and to use feedback and feed forward processes” (Young and Valach 1996, p. 364). This long-term construction is dependent on the construction of *projects* of a mid-term length, and projects are only possible when they can be seen as relevant actions that are associated through common and hierarchically-linked goals (Young et al. 2011b).

In this definition, the authors made an important conceptual link between action and career. It also uncouples the link between career and occupation, suggesting that long-term, life-sustaining goals can and are found in other areas of life. Career is not simply an occupation or a series of occupations. In modern parlance, career is understood as a central construct through which people make sense not only of specific aspects of their lives, but major domains over extended periods of time. Mid-term projects provide an important link between actions and career and need more careful attention in the evaluation of vocational and educational guidance (Young et al. 2007b).

One can readily identify the goal-directedness of action both within career counselling programmes and in the daily lives of people. The goal-directedness of action can be discussed and understood as intentionality, which is to say that actions, projects and careers are about something. What they are about reflects the intentionality of the action. This paradigm reflects a strong view of intentionality.

These systems are further specified as being organised at several levels. Long-term career, mid-term projects, and short-term actions can be considered at the level of meaning (what meaning can be and is offered and realised through them). Meaning is captured through the goals that an action, project or career has. It is recognised in the social dimension of human action, that is, in how others see the action. A second perspective on action, projects and career involves the internal or communicative processes that the person engages in to steer them. Finally, there is the perspective of the manifest behaviour that the person engages in and the structural and personal resources as well as unconscious processes that support or detract from that behaviour (Domene et al. 2015; Valach et al. 2002b).

Notwithstanding the conceptual link among action, project and career, they are distinguished by the length of time that one is involved in them as well as the significance of how particular actions and projects are hierarchically organised within careers. As actions take on a longer time perspective in a project or career, they inevitably imply greater social connection and embedding. These projects and careers are constructed in the context of roles, norms, laws, and expectations of larger and more complex social groups and institutional order. One can readily

engage in a caring action toward another person for a few minutes without significant reference to the larger social context. However, the caring actions and projects that contribute to the career of a parent can only be fully understood in the larger social context in which it is lived out (Young and Valach 2004). Thus, this contextual action paradigm for career provides an important link to culture (Young et al. 2007a). Action relates an individual to his or her culture. Goals, cognitive and social processes, and behaviours are transparent and available within cultures, and cultures are continually reconstructed by them. Career, through actions and projects over the long term, allows one to relate to the complexity of environments in which one participates over time, that is, our culture or cultures. It is through career that one can engage more fully with culture and it is culture that allows us to engage in career. This is a complex interaction as both career and culture are high order constructs. But culture represents more than individual beliefs and opportunities, and career is more than either action or project (Valach et al. 2015).

The contextual action theory framework for career is itself not prescriptive. It does not describe what should be the case. Rather it is a conceptual framework that allows for understanding the constituent parts of career. By examining each of the constituent parts, one can propose what may be life-enhancing rather than life-limiting. The critical feature is that, because this paradigm posits interrelated systems, process and levels for our understanding of career, it allows a more detailed response to what comprises the life-enhancing career.

Life-Enhancing Career

This paradigm based on goal-directed action leads us several steps closer to issues of quality in research and evaluation in educational and vocational guidance by linking natural phenomena to the consciousness within which goals are held, as was pointed out earlier. Thus far, a framework for understanding goals, and internal and social processes and behaviours that compose action was developed. But, the goals themselves have not yet been identified. At some level to identify goals explicitly would be to undermine the representation of intentionality in the assessment of quality. It would suggest that the person him- or herself, with his or her individual and joint goals, is not important in understanding how this paradigm can address what should be the case in life. Indeed, one may argue that the opposite is the case, that the contribution of this paradigm is that it links goals to natural phenomena. Nevertheless, this paradigm can be used to illustrate how a life-enhancing career can be formed through the attention to action, project and career, and thus gently point to evaluative criteria in research and evaluation (Young and Valach 2009).

From time immemorial, philosophers and religious leaders have been interested in what composes the good life, or what makes a life good, or worth living. Among the answers are various combinations of knowledge, friendship, beauty, altruism, and acting out of sense of duty. In the same vein, the phrase “to love and to work” has been attributed to Freud in answer to the question of what constitutes mental

health. Vaillant (2003) suggested recent attempts in psychiatry to identify the factors contributing to positive mental health, including models of normality, positive psychology, and maturity, must consider the capacity to love and to work over time as well as the assessment of social competence and coping style. Similar questions have been asked in the field of occupational psychology. For example, Warr (2002) identified the psychological attributes of work that are important for psychological well-being. These include personal control, and opportunities for using one's skills and for interpersonal contact (see also Linley et al. 2010).

These characteristics of the good life reflect, in one way or another, the action theoretical paradigm proposed for the field of career. But these findings represent a rather static understanding of traits, statuses, or environments. What is added in the paradigm proposed here is their grounding in a conceptual framework that includes the dynamic relation among action, project and career. This comprehensive approach also uses the three levels in which actions are organized, namely meaningful goal level, the level of steering and control of the cognitive-emotional and interactive action, and the level of action elements with its process of regulation. Thus, rather than consider one or other characteristic of the good life that may contribute to a long-term goal, such as friendship, altruism, or work status, a fuller understanding can be had through this dynamic perspective.

While critical moments of decision are important, the good life is also composed of the actions of everyday life. Kupperman (1999), for example, suggested that the life worth living is created between the moments of the big decisions such as occupation, education, or having a family. This is true in vocational guidance as well, when, for example, significant decisions are considered as supported by longer periods of exploration and trial. The point here is that an integrative paradigm should include everyday actions as well as larger frameworks and phenomena such as those identified as career.

The question of what composes the good life, although broad, can be re-phrased in the career field as, "What comprises a life-enhancing career?" By life-enhancing is meant intensifying or increasing the quality of life. It denotes careers that lead one to fullness and can be understood as maintaining the human person over a long period of time, despite the negative turns and twists of fate. The notion of the life-enhancing career is proposed because evidence suggests that all careers, and the occupations that contribute to them, are not necessarily life-enhancing. In fact, many would report careers that are life-limiting, life-diminishing, and even life-destroying (Valach et al. 2006b).

Answers to questions similar to the one that was posed above are emerging in various areas of psychology, for example, positive psychology (Lopez 2009; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000), strength-based counselling (Smith 2006), and posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). The answer to the question, "What comprises a life-enhancing career?" is based on the contextual action theory of career that has been described above and elsewhere (Young et al. 2002, 2015a). The rationale for answering this question is at the core of the counselling perspective presented here and critical to research and evaluation in this area.

At first glance, the challenge of answering the question of the life-enhancing career seems formidable but by breaking it down into its constituent parts the answer becomes manageable and useful to counsellors. The answer is directly related to the issue of assessment and evaluation in career guidance. The possibility of generating an integrative paradigm for research and evaluation in educational and vocational guidance requires it address comprehensiveness and specificity. Unless our understanding of career has breadth and depth, then subsequent evaluations of career guidance programmes are apt to be piecemeal and fragmentary. The approach requires the specificity to allow the evaluator or researcher to look in detail at a range of career components and processes and broad enough to see them in the context of the whole (related to each other).

Table 37.1 presents a range of components involved in the life-enhancing career. It reflects the two dimensions identified in the contextual action theory of career, that is, the systems of goal directed processes in forms of action, project and career and the levels of action organisation. Reading across the table from left to right, the reader will see that the conceptual relationship between action, project and career has been posited; that is, meaningful goal-directed actions can lead to motivated

Table 37.1 Domains and issues of the life-enhancing career

	Meaningful goal-directed actions	Motivated participation in projects generated by actor and/or others	Life-enhancing career
At the level of meaning	Shared action goals	Joint, goal-directed projects	Long-term meaning of life
	Relevant to projects and career	Cooperative	Socially integrated
		Emotionally sensitive Relevant to career and identity	Emotionally satisfying
At the level of functional processes	Serving identity and goal processes	Mid-term challenging	Long-term challenging
	Emotional and cognitive components	Successful steps	Allowing predictability and novelty
		Positive feedback in cooperative undertakings	Attendance to emotional issues
		Emotionally functional	
At the level of unconscious and conscious behaviour, structural support, resources	Energy	Adequate structural support	Long-term adequate time and sequence
	Cognitive and emotional regulation	Predictable and manageable time order	Structural properties
	Skills	Adequate emotional resources	Resources
	Habits		Functional emotional regulation

participation in projects, which, in turn, can lead to a life-enhancing career in the long-term. In each case, an evaluative word has been added to denote that it is not just any action, project or career that is of interest, but actions that are meaningful, projects that reflect motivated participation, and careers that are life enhancing. The implication is that the evaluative terms are linked as well.

The levels of goals, internal and social processes, and elements are provided when one reads the table from top to bottom. The meaning level represents how specific actions, projects, and career represent goals and how these goals fit into the larger pictures of our lives. These actions, projects and career are steered through internal and social processes (our thoughts and feelings and our interactions with others). Finally, the specific verbal and non-verbal behaviour that we engage in is represented at the third level. This level also recognises that unconscious processes are likely to play in people's behaviour (Dyer et al. 2010). As well, it suggests that behaviour is supported or not supported, as the case may be, by structural variables and resources. It also suggests that functional emotional regulation, skills, and habits are critical.

The cells of this table are illustrated with specific concepts and constructs. The effort here is to be illuminating rather than comprehensive, but the items in the table go a long way to describe the components of the life-enhancing career. Some examples of the relationship among the components of the table follow. One cannot expect a person to engage in a meaningful joint project if he or she does not have the skills needed to engage in the actions in that domain. The International Labour Office considers employment skills to be a crucial factor worldwide in sustaining and enhancing opportunities through work (International Labour Office (ILO) 2006). In Young and colleagues' research, they have repeatedly run into the lack of time and poor time management as deterrents to the joint projects of parents and adolescents pertinent to the adolescent's future (e.g., Young et al. 2006). Further, the possibility of a long-term, life-enhancing career in the occupational sense is being continually eroded by massive economic and social changes in the world of work (Blustein 2013). Sennett (1998), for example, did not use the goal-directed language of this chapter but essentially argued that changes in the structural properties of work through increased competition, flexibility, globalisation and other factors may be associated with the experience of betrayal (attendance to emotional processes—cognitive and emotional steering) and lack of relational connection (at the level of meaning) needed for the life-enhancing career.

More challenging is to appreciate the place of steering processes in these three systems of action. One can readily recognise that as one engages in action, at the moment, one has thoughts and feelings which serve to guide that action in the moment, for example, the anxiety a person may experience at a job interview (Feller and Powell 2015). For mid-term projects, one's cognitive and emotional steering requires that tasks remain challenging, that there is positive feedback, and success is experienced. For example, Salmela-Aro et al. (2004) showed that personal work projects offered a heuristic framework for understanding and reducing negative emotions at work, pointing out the salience of the connection between projects and internal processes. For longer-term careers, one expects that the steering processes

will involve a succession of necessary steps, a regular attendance to important issues such as those related to emotional and physical wellbeing and the relevance of these steps to the overall goals and values.

Finally, at the level of meaning, goal-directed individual and shared actions and projects are addressed. The relevance of actions to projects and career is of decisive value. Ongoing alternate attention would have to be paid to the relevant projects in the person's life, not only to occupational or educational ones, but also to identity, relational, and emotional projects. Their quality stems from their regulatory value and their contribution to the larger long-term goal-directed system persons engage in. In the career systems, the issue hinges on the contribution of the career to satisfactory projects and actions as well as to issues of meaning of life, spiritual qualities, individual and community existence, survival, and flourishing. A range of studies have shown the significance of the meaning level of anticipated or realised long-term career (e.g., Bauer and McAdams 2004; King and Napa 1998).

It would be presumptuous to imply that this explanation of the life-enhancing career closes the circle on our search for the good life. Although life-enhancing careers are possible, people never experience them as complete. One's search for meaning continues. The question of career, of "What kind of life am I to have?", is an existential and ethical question that no amount of technical and rational knowledge can fully answer. As an open system, new actions, projects and careers arise and are, or potentially are, continually in the making. The call for participation and engagement in life, the sense of responsibility, and the ongoing desire for meaning making reflect aspects of intentionality that ensures the openness of this system.

Research and Evaluation Methods

The specific means to conduct research and evaluation studies in career guidance using the action theoretical paradigm have been described elsewhere (see Wall et al. 2016; Marshall et al. 2012; Valach et al. 2002b; Young et al. 2005). These methods include the following.

The Unit of Analysis

The action is the unit of analysis in research and evaluation framed from an action theoretical perspective. This unit of analysis contrasts with the person, which has typically been the unit of analysis in career guidance studies. Some studies may assume a unit of analysis that is an extension of action, that is, they may focus on project or career. More specifically, it is the action in which the person or persons are involved jointly. In the case of projects, this can be represented as a series of actions over time that the parties involved in it see as having common joint goals.

For example, one domain of transition-to-adulthood projects are the series of actions between friends, which have been identified and researched (e.g., Young et al. 2015b).

Data Gathering

The data gathering reflects the perspectives on action proposed earlier, that is, it is recommended that researchers collect data from the three perspectives, manifest behaviour, internal processes, and social meaning (Young et al. 2005). First, video-recording is used to collect data about the manifest behaviour involved in the action, but other means to observe and record the manifest behaviour associated with action are also appropriate, including self-observation. The focus, however, in collecting data about the manifest behaviour of action is to have a concrete record of behaviour for use during the analysis. Second, data are gathered about the internal processes that participants use to steer and guide their action. These thoughts and feelings are gathered immediately following the action by using the self-confrontation procedure (Young et al. 1994). During this procedure, the manifest behaviour just collected on video is played back for the person or persons separately, the video is stopped at intervals of 1 or 2 min, depending on the length of the meaningful action unit, and the person is asked to recall what he or she was thinking or feeling at the time of the action that has just been replayed on the video. Data on the person's internal processes while the action is taking place can also be gathered through diaries and other self-assessment forms where the person is asked to recall thoughts and feelings about a current or just completed action (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 1984). Finally, data are collected about the social meaning of action by encouraging the persons themselves and others, such as naïve observers, to comment on the action as appropriate. One source of this social meaning data is provided in the self-confrontation interview, where the partners comment on each other's actions, but other means of accessing the naïve observations of the participants' cultural and language community represent suitable ways to collect social meaning data, including interviews and diaries. The critical factor in data-gathering is not the specific data gathering means described above, but that the researchers and evaluators obtain substantial data from the three data sources identified. When taken together these data can contribute significantly to understanding the action in question. We have to accept that systematic observation is based on social understanding without paying tribute to ideological biases. As such observation is not independent from the assumed subjective processes of the observed.

Analysis

The research or evaluation question is critical in the analysis of the data just described. Essentially, the method requires that, as a result of the analysis, researchers can describe the actions in question, and then to infer projects and careers in which participants are engaged. The analysis as proceeding from description to organisation has been described (Wall et al. 2016; Young et al. 2005). Two critical steps in the analysis are working from both a top-down as well as a bottom-up fashion. In the top-down procedure, the effort is to identify broad intentional frameworks and series of goals and sub goals for the participants involved in the action, as well as to identify their joint goals. Subsequently a bottom-up analysis is undertaken in which the specific verbal and non-verbal behaviour involved in the action is analysed at a micro level and attention is paid to regulation of behaviour and to unconscious and subconscious processes, to the extent that access to these processes is available. This analysis of behavioural elements is then used to identify the functional steps that are subsequently related to previously identified goals and sub goals. Finally, the identification of action steps comes together in a comprehensive description of the action, project, or career under scrutiny.

Application of the Action Theory Paradigm to Counselling

Counselling is one of the primary processes in educational and vocational guidance. One of the important reasons for choosing the action theory informed paradigm for research and evaluation of educational and vocational guidance is its ability to capture how counselling itself is organised and encountered (Young et al. 2015a). An attempt will be made to make the case below that counselling can be understood and practised from an action-theoretical paradigm. If this paradigm is heuristic in understanding counselling, then its use as a framework for research and evaluation of counselling is warranted. In this discussion, counselling is used as a case in point. This discussion can be applied to other formal and informal educational and vocational guidance interventions and programmes.

When meeting clients, counsellors should offer their professional services in such a way that the clients are able to unfold, develop, and expand their ongoing projects and career in both their narrative and the actual process of the encounter with the counsellor (Young et al. 2015c). Clients' narratives may represent some or all of the nine cells depicted in Table 37.1. Counsellors should initially encourage the construction of the narrative as a whole, but recognise that the perspectives and organisation of any narrative can be extensive. Counsellors also must be able to assist clients to present themselves as self-responsible, meaning-making, and goal-directed agents who experience themselves in this way in the encounter with the

counsellor, thus giving them good reasons to believe that they will proceed in a similar manner in their actions and projects following counselling.

Joint Actions During the Counselling Encounter

To organise the encounter with clients, counsellors should aim at identifying and using significant joint actions and projects between themselves and their clients (Young et al. 2015c). One possibility for the counsellor is to help clients understand their own goals. Counsellors can inform their clients that they will assist them by helping to identify their goals. In turn, clients will see the counsellor as someone who takes them seriously, who understands them, and who also will help them to achieve their goals. Counsellors can encourage clients to provide narratives of the ongoing action, projects and career with which they can work. Counsellors must show that they take the clients' feelings seriously and understand them accurately. This is particularly the case when clients show emotion related to traumas they have experienced in their life career (Michel et al. 2004; Valach et al. 2002a). At the same time as recognising, addressing, and understanding these feelings, counsellors must respect the client's narrative in which client emotion is embedded.

Counsellors can assist in the joint construction of the narratives by helping clients to transform their ideas and experiences to a linguistic form, while being supported during this process (Young et al. 2015c). As this often is difficult to achieve in one interview, a procedure was adopted, which helps us in repeatedly returning together with the clients to the interview to address issues at various levels. The video supported feedback, called the self-confrontation interview, which was discussed earlier as a data collection procedure, can also be used in practice. It consists of video recording the interview and subsequently playing back meaningful segments to clients to discuss specific issues (Young et al. 2015c). Counsellors can ask about and attend to the feelings and thoughts clients had during the interview, and they can ask about additional information such as context or background data, about client assumptions, or the implications of particular statements. This procedure allows counsellors to limit their interruptions during the interview itself to a minimum without losing anything.

Joint Goal-Directed Processes Preceding Counselling

Our empirical research, informed by this action theoretical paradigm, has shown that people organise their ongoing life processes in terms of actions, projects, and career (e.g., Valach et al. 2016; Young et al. 2001, 2006, 2018). These actions, projects, and careers also serve individuals as a cognitive and social organisation scheme or frame of reference for their experiences as well as a means for them to present their lives and their involvement in their lives. Once given the authority and the

freedom to steer the joint actions with counsellors according to their own standards, clients will provide narratives that are built up in this way. In various studies with research participants involved in naturally unfolding conversations with their peers or family members, we demonstrated how the participants described their ongoing life processes in terms of joint goal-directed actions, projects and careers (e.g., Young et al. 2001, 2006, 2018). In addition, the video recording of such naturally occurring interaction of clients with their peers or parents, and the subsequent self-confrontation enables counsellors to recognise and uncover clients' joint projects. Most often these projects are relevant to the clients' vocational career or other foci of counselling.

Vocational Actions, Projects, and Career Following Counselling

Any counselling or educational or vocational guidance intervention or programme strives for clients' self-responsible agency in organising their lives in terms of goal directed actions, projects and career following the intervention or programme (e.g., Young et al. 2011a). This is true, as well, of naturally occurring guidance, such as the joint actions of parents and adolescents intended to facilitate the adolescent's career development or transition to adulthood in a trans-generational cultural context (Young et al. 2003). It also occurs in formal programmes intended to facilitate these types of outcomes, such as counselling for the transition to adulthood (Young et al. 2011b), psychotherapy (Valach and Young 2013), counselling and psychotherapy for persons who have attempted suicide (Valach et al. 2006a), in teaching (Valach and Stevens 2008) and for rehabilitation clients (Valach and Wald 2002). However, the self-responsibility for organising one's life in terms of goal-directed action, project, and career is evident for a full range of people, including those, who, after traumatic experiences, found a sense of coherence (Antonovsky 1979) and life meaning (Frankl 1992).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted to show that the action theory paradigm is particularly well suited to research and evaluation in educational and vocational guidance. It is particularly suitable to the extent that educational and vocational guidance is directed toward establishing, maintaining and changing joint processes that are present at the action and project levels. Educational and vocational guidance is not usually directed at structural changes in the client's life, thus, the proposed paradigm does not address structural change explicitly. For example, the purpose of counselling or other educational and vocational guidance programmes is not usually to change the economic conditions of a person's life directly, nor is it to increase the number of occupational opportunities in a particular field. It is not expected that

structural changes by themselves will engender a good life or a life-enhancing career. Consequently, the role of counsellors lies in supporting their clients in these processes and not in ‘repairing’ structural or other factors.

As a paradigm for research and evaluation in educational and vocational guidance, the contextual action theory of career accomplishes five goals. First, it emphasises the processes level of conceptualisation proposed by Savickas (2002) without losing any of the perspectives provided by dispositions, career concerns, or narrative. Secondly, it opens the understanding of evaluation by focusing on processes as well as outcomes. Thirdly, it shifts the focus of research from studying the “reasons why” phenomena occur to studying the “reasons for” by bringing consciousness and natural phenomena together; that is, its perspective is teleological rather than causal. Fourthly, it recognises formal and informal educational and vocational guidance as a largely joint process. Finally, it sees action, project, and career as open systems in which fundamentally moral questions can be and are asked.

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