

The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development and Counseling: Connecting Theory and Practice

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The practice of career counseling has been derived from principles of career theory and counseling theory. In recent times, the fields of both career and counseling theory have undergone considerable change. This article details the move toward convergence in career theory, and the subsequent development of the Systems Theory Framework in this domain. The importance of this development to connecting theory and practice in the field of career counseling is discussed.

KEY WORDS: systems theory; career counseling; career theory; counseling theory.

Systems theory has been proposed as a potential overarching framework for dealing with many issues in human behavior. Contributors to systems theory have come from many diverse fields, including physics (Capra, 1982), biology, anthropology and psychology (Bateson, 1979). The work on living systems by Ford (1987) and Ford and Ford (1987) has served to develop an integrated framework of human development and has furthered the development and understanding of systems theory. Developmental Systems Theory (DST; Ford & Lerner, 1992) and Motivational Systems Theory (MST; Ford, 1992) have illustrated the applicability of systems theory principles to human behavior.

Patton and McMahon (1999, 2006) have extended the utility of systems theory in their application of it as a metatheoretical framework for career theory, and as a guide to redefine career counseling practice. The field of career development, as with many other fields of psychology, is characterized by a variable and complex theoretical base. The early thinking by career theorists had ranged

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from acknowledging the potential of systems theory in furthering the integration of career theory and practice, incorporating aspects of systems theory into theoretical formulations, to drawing on theoretical frameworks of human development derived from general systems theory as frameworks within which to further understand specific aspects of human career behavior. Whilst systems theory had influenced the thinking of career theorists and researchers for over a decade, until the work of Patton and McMahon (1999), it had not been applied to the provision of an overarching theoretical framework. The Systems Theory Framework (STF; McMahon, 2002; McMahon & Patton, 1995; Patton, 1997; Patton & McMahon, 1999, 2006) is not designed to be a theory of career development; rather it is construed as an overarching framework within which all concepts of career development described in the plethora of career theories can be usefully positioned and utilized in theory and practice.

THE SYSTEMS THEORY FRAMEWORK-MAPPING THE ORIGINS OF CAREER COUNSELING

The STF provides a map for understanding the origins of career counseling and the dilemma it is now facing. Career counseling is a unique discipline built on a foundation of career theory and counseling theory. Traditional career theory has tended to focus on specific discrete concepts relevant to individual career behavior. In focusing on only one aspect relevant to career decision-making, for example, intrapersonal aspects such as self-concept, others are inevitably undervalued or ignored, and the nature of their interaction almost certainly is.

Central to the STF is the individual system within which is depicted a range of intrapersonal influences on career development, such as personality, ability, gender, and sexual orientation. Some of these influences have received considerable attention by career theorists and others have not. As individuals do not live in isolation, the individual system is connected with influences that comprise the individual's social system as well as the broader environmental/societal system. While the influence of many factors, such as geographic location and political decisions, on career development is less well understood within the theoretical literature, their influence on career development may be profound.

The STF presents career development as a dynamic process, depicted through its process influences, recursiveness, change over time and chance (see Fig. 1). Fundamental to understanding the STF is the notion that each system is an open system. An open system is subject to influence from outside and may also influence that which is beyond its boundaries. Such interaction is termed recursiveness in the STF, which in diagrammatic form is depicted by broken lines that represent the permeability of the boundaries of each system. It is well acknowledged that influences on an individual may change over time. The final process influence, chance, is depicted on the STF diagram as lightning flashes, reflecting an increased

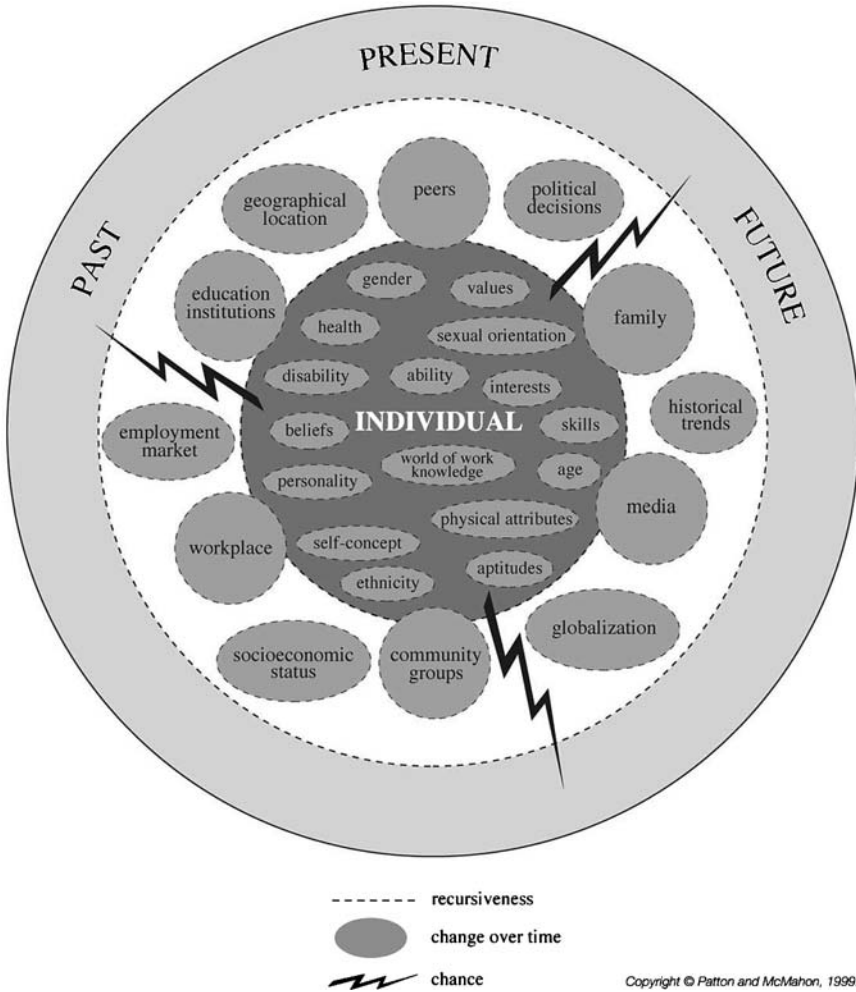


Fig. 1. The systems theory framework of career development (from Patton & McMahon, 1999).

recognition of the part chance plays in career development. All of the systems of influence are located within the context of time—past, present and future—all of which are inextricably linked; past influences the present, and together past and present influence the future.

The traditional approach also needed to be understood in the context of time and the world of work when career counseling, then termed vocational guidance, was first developed. At that time, in the early part of the last century, the world of work essentially provided individuals with a job for life, and the predominant

issue brought to counseling was that of career choice, usually at school leaving age. Indeed, knowledge about the world of work in order to facilitate career choice also became an essential component of the career counseling process. Thus, career counseling was largely seen as an objective cognitive problem-solving process whereby matching knowledge about self and knowledge about the world of work would result in a sound career choice.

This approach to career counseling lent itself comfortably to the use of psychometric assessment of elements of the intrapersonal system of the client, such as ability, personality, self-concept, and/or aptitude. Assessment figured significantly in career counseling, and part of the role of the counselor was to administer assessment instruments, interpret the results, and convey them to the client. Such an approach established career counseling as different from personal counseling. It also portrayed the role of the counselor as one of an expert who would tell a client what to do. It was this approach, termed the trait and factor approach, that dominated career counseling for much of the twentieth century.

A CHANGING FOCUS

However, the focus on which career counseling is based has changed dramatically. While the elements of the system are the same, their nature and relevance to career counseling are different. In particular, career theories have broadened and new theories have been proposed, and the world of work has undergone dramatic and irreversible change (Brown & Associates, 2002; Patton & McMahon, 1999). In today's world, people change jobs several times in a lifetime, and occupational choice is only one of a myriad of concerns that clients bring to career counselors. Career theories need to be appropriate for the complexity of individuals living in a complex world.

Traditional career theories have been challenged as being too narrow; new theories have been proposed to encompass elements of the social system and the environmental-societal system and the integration (or convergence) of theories has been debated and explored (Savickas & Lent, 1994). In addition, proponents of the traditional but more narrow theories have acknowledged the influence of elements of the broader system on their clients. Indeed, theorists and practitioners alike have been challenged to be more holistic in their thinking.

Proponents of moves toward convergence in career theory (Chen, 2003; Savickas & Lent, 1994) have emphasized the importance of viewing the whole of career behavior and the relationship between all relevant elements in the career decision-making process to each other and to the whole. In doing so, it is important that contributions from all theories are considered in exploring an individual's career decision-making processes. Thus the theoretical map underpinning career counseling in the 21st century is markedly different from that which existed when career counseling first began.

CAREER COUNSELING TO DATE

The practice of career counseling has lagged behind that advocated by more recent approaches to both career development theory and counseling practice. This is evidenced by the fact that the dominant approach used in career counseling is still the trait and factor approach, with its individual problem-solving focus. A number of writers have emphasized that it is time career counseling was re-constructed to be an effective process in these changing times (Savickas, 2000). Challenges such as the redefinition of career (McMahon, Patton, & Tatham, 2003; Richardson, 1996) and the demands being made on career counseling at sociopolitical levels (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004) demand a response. In this regard, Savickas (1993) urges that career counseling “keep pace with our society’s movement to a postmodern era” (p. 205) and that its practice needs to move from “seeking truth to participation in conversations; from objectivity to perspectivity” (p. 205). As constructivism represents an epistemological position that emphasizes self-organizing and proactive knowing, it provides a perspective from which to conceptualize changing notions of career in postmodern society. These changing notions include the importance of individuals becoming more self-directed in making meaning of the place of work in their lives and in managing their careers (Richardson, 1996). The active role of the individual in the career counseling process is emphasized within a constructivist approach, as career counselors aim to work collaboratively with individuals, focusing on holistic approaches to life-career, and encouraging individuals to actively reflect on, revise, and reorient their life-career relationship (McMahon & Patton, 2002).

Career counseling can be seen as very much an evolving profession. In reality it has emerged as a profession in its own right only comparatively recently. Herr (1997) explains that for much of its history, career counseling was rarely differentiated from vocational or career guidance, and that it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the term ‘career guidance and counseling’ sufficiently differentiated the two elements. It is only in the last twenty years that calls have been made for expanded views of career counseling in response to changes in society, and increasing attention is being paid to changing definitions of career counseling.

Herr (1997) distinguishes five observations about the changes in career counseling. They are that:

- its principal content is the perceptions, anxieties, information deficits, work personalities, competencies, and motives that persons experience in their interactions with their external environment;
- career counseling is not a singular process, but a term used to summarize a range of interventions;
- career counseling is no longer conceived as a process principally focused on ensuring that adolescents make a wise choice of an initial job;

- career counseling may be considered the preferred intervention of choice, . . . but may be one of a program of interventions . . . to deal with emotional or behavioral disorders that accompany or confound the career problem;
- career counseling may best be thought of as a continuum of intervention processes (pp. 85–86).

Herr notes that these changes in the content and processes of career counseling have not occurred in a vacuum; rather they are in response to the prevailing conditions in society.

Another example of the changing nature of career counseling has been the debate about the fusion of career and personal counseling (Hackett, 1993; Krumboltz, 1993). This debate has represented the first serious challenge to the problem-solving traditions of career counseling, and has drawn attention to the need for career counseling to change its practices in order to be more relevant. It is too simplistic to adopt the approach that individuals can separate career issues from personal issues for, as Savickas (1993) stated, “career is personal” (p. 212). More recently, discussion on career counseling has reflected a move toward constructivist approaches (McMahon & Patton, 2006), emphasizing the importance of focusing on all aspects of the whole individual. From a systems theory perspective, there is no debate as the uniqueness and wholeness of the individual is of paramount importance in counseling and the recursiveness of the elements of the individual’s subsystems cannot be separated from each other (see Fig. 1).

THE SYSTEMS THEORY FRAMEWORK: REFLECTING THE CAREER COUNSELING EXPERIENCE

The Systems Theory Framework (STF; Patton & McMahon, 1999, 2006) can provide a map for career counseling as it accommodates not only the perspectives of the traditional predictive theories, but also the positions of the more recent constructivist career counseling approaches (McMahon & Patton, 2002; McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003; 2004; McMahon, Watson, & Patton, 2005). A further strength of the systems theory perspective is the link it forges between theory and practice. The use of a Systems Theory Framework for understanding career development has implications for the practice of career counseling as it requires career counselors to make the difficult move from a comfortable traditional worldview to the emerging worldview with its different account of causality (Patton & McMahon, 1999). In using the approach, career counselors need to combine traditional approaches with the ability to think in circular rather than linear terms (see Fig. 2). The notion of circular feedback processes shaping and reshaping systems through subtle feedback is common in some fields of counseling (such as family therapy), yet comparatively new in the field of career counseling.

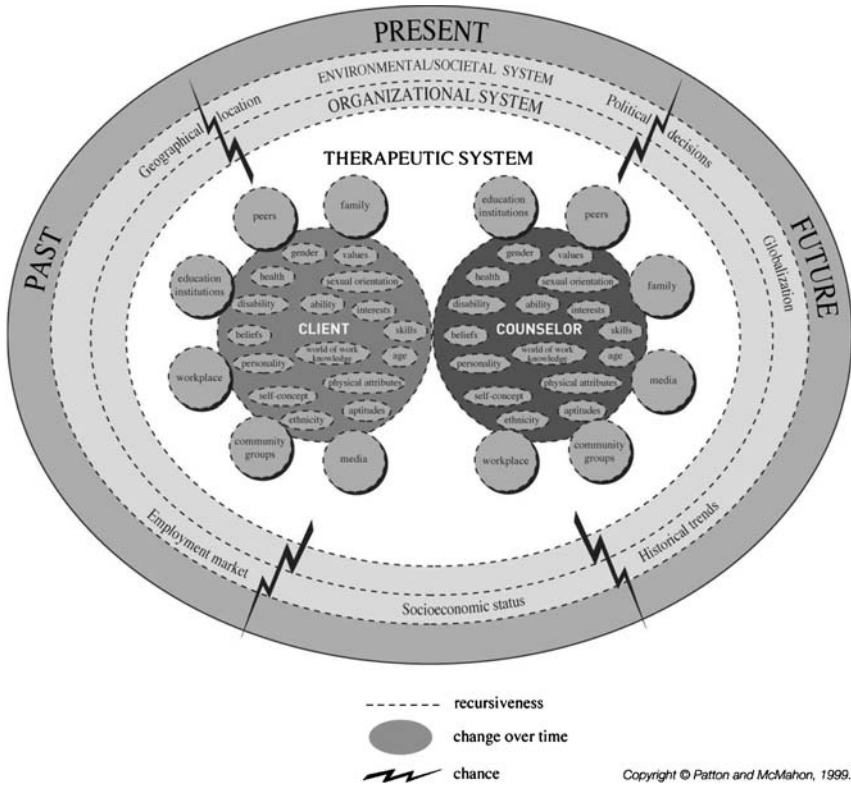


Fig. 2. The therapeutic system (from Patton & McMahon, 1999).

The interaction between the client and the counselor, that is, the counseling relationship itself, can be conceptualized as a system in its own right. In fact counselors become an element of the system of influences on the career development of the individual, and the individual becomes an element of the system of influences on the counselor. In this system of interaction, the counselor and the individual use language to co-construct the meaning of career for the individual in counseling. The career counseling process centres on meaning, with language as the medium (Patton & McMahon, 1999; Peavy, 2004).

Figure 2 portrays the complexity of the career counseling process and its place in the social and environmental-societal systems. Just as the career counselor exists within his/her own ever-changing system of influences, so too does the client. Thus, part of the career counselor's role is to understand the influences relevant to his/her own career story; that is, his/her own system of career influences. Career counseling constitutes the meeting of two separate systems and the formation of a new system, the therapeutic system (see Fig. 2). The boundaries of each system

must be permeable enough to allow a relationship to develop and dialogue and resulting meaning to occur, yet impermeable enough for both parties to maintain their individuality. Thus, the boundary between the counselor system and the client system needs to be maintained. However, as the relationship between members of the therapeutic system develops, the boundary between the client system and the counselor system may become less clear. Counselors who lose sight of this are in danger of imposing their own values on clients or manipulating them, or, alternatively, being manipulated by the client. Thus, the career counselor needs a clear understanding of their own stories formed through interaction with their own system of influences, past, present, and future, before they can facilitate exploration of the client's life narratives, including the meaning of career and work in their lives.

A systems theory perspective and associated narrative approaches enable the diversity to be addressed by engaging in a dialogue centered on the client's own narrative (Peavy, 2004). It is recognized that all individuals belong to and interrelate with multiple groups, and the counselor must be aware of the unique pattern of these social system influences in each client if counseling is to be successful (Peavy, 1998). At a broader level, career counseling takes place within the environmental-societal system and represents a recursive interaction between the counselor and a range of systems. Fig. 2 illustrates the interconnections between two systems of influences and the positioning of the interconnections between broader systems of influences shared by each individual system (that of the counselor and the client).

Career counseling is increasingly being seen as essential to the future well-being of individuals and nations in the rapidly changing world (Killeen, White, & Watts, 1992; Patton & McMahon, 1999). While this emphasis will raise the profile and expectations of career counselors, it will also place demands on them to provide accountable practices with outcomes that reflect responsiveness to the needs of society. In addition, it is increasingly important to be accountable to public funding bodies (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004). Influences at this level may affect government funding for certain programs or clients; for example, managed care, and the availability of services in remote or rural areas. In addition there is a move toward fee based counseling services, which challenges career counselors to provide a more diverse range of services than traditional one-to-one counseling. Thus, it is imperative that career counselors set their practice into the broad environmental-societal system.

Systems theory encourages interventions at levels of the system other than that of the individual, and raises the potential for career counselors to be more proactive at this broader systems level. For example, career counselors may work with a family or an organization in the belief that interventions anywhere in the system will interact with other elements of the system to bring about change. In addition they may become advocates for clients with particular needs; for example, individuals of low socioeconomic and/or minority status. The systems

theory construct of feedback loops is relevant here, as an intervention in one part of the system may result in better outcomes for the individual. A systems theory perspective may also assist clients to construct new meanings of their circumstances. For example, it may be helpful for individuals to view their employment circumstances in terms of the social and economic climate of the nation (Patton & McMahon, 1999).

CAREER COUNSELING: FACING THE CHALLENGE

As discussed, there is an emerging trend toward the use of constructivist approaches in career counseling, a trend which may make career counseling more relevant and responsive to the times and to the individuals who are its consumers (UNESCO, 2002). Such a move will also reduce its image as a simplistic process. The move toward constructivism has to some extent been heralded and influenced by discussion about the fusion of career counseling and personal counseling where constructivist approaches are more established (e.g., Patton & McMahon, 1999; Savickas, 1993).

Principles of constructivism and systems theory have been developed from a similar worldview. Brown and Brooks (1996) identify four assumptions underlying the emerging constructivist position in career development, specifically:

1. All aspects of the universe are interconnected; it is impossible to separate figure from ground, subject from object, people from their environments.
2. There are no absolutes; thus human functioning cannot be reduced to laws or principles, and cause and effect cannot be inferred.
3. Human behavior can only be understood in the context in which it occurs.
4. The subjective frame of reference of human beings is the only legitimate source of knowledge. Events occur outside human beings. As individuals understand their environments and participate in these events, they define themselves and their environments (p. 10).

These assumptions are clearly in keeping with the elements of systems theory. In particular, systems theory emphasizes interconnectedness and the importance of wholes rather than parts. Thus, an individual cannot be separated from their context, and behavior cannot be accounted for in a linear way. Knowledge is constructed within the individual in relation to their experience, and cannot be taught. Therefore, theory cannot be applied to individuals; they construct their own personal theory.

Human knowing is proactive and individuals actively participate in the creation of their own reality. In career counseling this occurs through the use of language and dialogue with the counselor (Bateson, 1979; Peavy, 1998, 2004). Knowledge is shaped through dialogue between the career counselor and the

client. The process of dialogue between counselor and client, and the construction of a new reality is termed co-construction. Thus, through language, individuals construct the story of their careers.

THE COUNSELING RELATIONSHIP

The incorporation of constructivist principles into career counseling changes the nature of the counseling relationship and the nature of the counseling process. Traditional career counseling approaches have seen the counselor take on what may be described as an expert role whose task it is to solve the client's problems, to explain through assessment, or to provide advice. Career counselors, therefore, have been criticized for not paying enough attention to the relationship with the client. However, using a constructivist approach, the quality of the relationship is essential, and characteristics such as acceptance, understanding, trust, and caring are critical (Granvold, 1996). In addition, there is little attempt by counselors to be seen as an authority, or draw conclusions from information.

Counselors operating from a constructivist position are less directive, provide less information, and facilitate a process of exploration and restructuring (Peavy, 1998). This is a process where the counselor and client join to construct and reconstruct meanings considered important in the client's life, through processes such as information sharing, interpretation, supportiveness, encouragement, structuring, and challenge (Granvold, 1996). Using this approach, there is a shift away from 'fixing' the presenting problem. Rather the emphasis in this approach could be described as having a "structural/process orientation" (Granvold, 1996, p. 348) whereby the personal meaning ascribed by the client to the problem is explored and possible new meanings constructed from which goals are developed and outcomes achieved.

Peavy (1992) advocates the term "fruitfulness" to replace the term "outcomes," and suggests that the career counseling process should be fruitful, that is "it should provide a re-construing or changed outlook on some aspect of life" (p. 221). Peavy presents four dimensions for career counselors to keep in mind if they are to be helpful to clients. They are relationship, agency, meaning-making, and negotiation. When working with clients, he suggests that career counselors ask themselves:

"How can I form a cooperative alliance with this client? (Relationship factor)
How can I encourage the self-helpfulness of this client? (Agency factor)
How can I help this client to elaborate and evaluate his or her constructions and meanings germane to their decisions? (Meaning-making factor)
How can I help this client to reconstruct and negotiate personally meaningful and socially supportable realities? (Negotiation factor)" (Peavy, 1992, p. 221).

THE USE OF STORY: THE NARRATIVE APPROACH

The use of dialogue between client and counselor in constructivist counseling is often referred to as the narrative approach. Stories or narratives are “a unique derivative of systems theory thinking” (Patton & McMahon, 1999, p. 235) and are key to constructivist approaches (McMahon & Patton, 2006). The concept of story in systems theory was originally derived from Bateson (1979) who defined it as the individual’s explanation of the relevance of a particular sequence of connectedness in his or her life. Through stories, individuals make meaning of their lives. Stories represent a mechanism for human knowing in that individuals “construct their identities from the symbols or meanings on offer within their culture” (McLeod, 1996, p. 178). Richardson’s (1996) call for a focus on the individual and the place of work in people’s lives is useful as an example of the type of story that may be uncovered in career counseling. In addition, through story, the patterns and themes of an individual’s life can be uncovered, and interconnections forged between previously unconnected events. Gysbers, Heppner, and Johnston (1998) describe career development as “the drama of the ordinary because it is unfolding and evolving every day” (p. 12), and suggest that because of its “ordinariness,” individuals may lose sight of its dynamic nature and impact on their lives. The use of story is a way of “identifying and analyzing life career themes” (Gysbers et al., 1998, p. 236) and uncovering the meaning that individuals ascribe to interwoven parts of their lives and focusing on their subjective careers.

THE PLACE OF ASSESSMENT

The use of narrative approaches also challenges career counselors to examine the type and place of career assessment in their counseling (McMahon & Patton, 2002; Savickas, 1992). The use of assessment remains one of the biggest differences between personal and career counseling. However, the use of narrative approaches and the potential use of narrative forms of assessment breaks down what has traditionally been a barrier between the merging of the two forms of counseling. To a large extent formal assessment in career counseling “reflect(s) old science” (Bradley, 1994, p. 224), and the traditional worldview that sits comfortably with the trait and factor approaches. In fact, the use of assessment has traditionally been a major contributing factor in how the career counseling relationship has been defined. For example, the career counselor, with answers based on the objective data provided through quantitative assessment instruments, could be seen as an expert to whom the client deferred. As career counselors make increasing use of narrative assessment the counseling relationship will be defined differently.

Narrative, or qualitative, assessment is intended to encourage individuals to tell their own career stories (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2004). The subjective component has traditionally been overlooked in career counseling, and Savickas (1992) suggests that the distinction between personal and career counseling will be reduced by adding the subjective component through the use of qualitative assessment. He further claims that qualitative assessment “emphasizes the counseling relationship rather than the delivery of the service” (p. 337). The four most popular methods of qualitative assessment are autobiographies, early recollections, structured interviews, and card sorts. While these methods are not new to counselors, many of them are new to career counselors. In addition, the method of constructing life lines is useful for assisting clients to review their life histories. Goldman (1992) suggests that counselors can develop their own qualitative assessment instruments. The Systems Theory Framework is an example of a tool that can be used in qualitative assessment and the framework’s authors have developed a reflection process (My System of Career Influences-MSCI) that is derived from the framework (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003, 2004, 2005; McMahon, Watson, & Patton, 2005). The MSCI is a tool that facilitates the client’s drawing their own constellation of influences via a step-by-step process of visually representing aspects of their career stories. In this way, the uniqueness and wholeness of clients’ career narratives or stories is emphasized and career counsellors may gain insight into the interconnectedness of systemic influences in each individual client’s career story.

CONCLUSION

Career counseling’s challenge is to prepare for an emerging world view that proposes ways of thinking different from that of traditional career counseling. Career counseling also faces a challenge of meeting the needs of our clients and a sociopolitical system that is at last seeing its benefits (OECD, 2004). The application of systems theory principles to the counseling process and to the world view that guides the contemporary career counselor’s practice can be facilitated through the Systems Theory Framework. This framework can ensure that the many influences relevant to the process of career counseling in the new millenium will receive the appropriate attention.

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