

10 KEY CONCEPTS IN CAREER THEORY



1. **Beyond “test and tell.”** Traditional theories matched traits and factors. The underlying assumption was that knowing enough about individuals facilitated matching them to appropriate jobs. Although Frank Parsons (1909) trait-factor model and [Holland’s RIASEC model](#) still influence our work and underpin many current interest assessments, we go beyond “test and tell” to engage clients in career conversations and consider more than just their individual characteristics in supporting them to make career decisions.
2. **Recycling through stages of development.** Although the important contributions of developmental theories such as Ginsberg and Super still influence our understanding of careers, Super himself acknowledged that life events result in many people revisiting early changes – he called these “mini-cycles.” Recognizing “normal” stages of career development (i.e., growth, exploratory, establishment, maintenance, and decline) helps inform programs in schools, early stages of work, and even retirement planning. However, it’s not uncommon for displaced workers, for example, to have to revisit earlier stages of career exploration and establishment before returning once again to their more age-appropriate stage of career growth or maintenance.
3. **Complexity of life roles.** In some of [Super’s](#) later development work, he began exploring the saliency (importance) of various life roles (e.g., worker, student, citizen, leisurite, family). More recently, [Sunny Hansen’s](#) holistic approach to “weaving our lives into a meaningful whole” is presented in her Integrative Life Planning theory. Hansen identified six critical life tasks to accomplish in life: (1) Finding work that needs doing, (2) Maintaining health and wellbeing, (3) Connecting family and work, (4) Valuing pluralism and inclusivity, (5) Exploring spirituality and life purpose, and (6) Managing personal transitions and organizational change.
4. **Culture counts.** Many recent authors have focused on a very broad definition of culture (i.e., one that includes age, ethnicity, race, gender, location, sexual orientation, religion, ability, socio-economic status, education, and many other considerations). [Arthur and Collins](#), in their Culture-Infused Career Counselling model incorporate six guiding assumptions, (1) Culture is relevant in career interventions with all clients, not just those in designated groups, (2) Culture is also relevant for all counsellors and career practitioners (i.e., all have socialized beliefs and influences that shape their understanding and approaches), (3) View of career and career issues are socially and culturally defined, (4) Career theories and models contain cultural assumptions, (5) Career goals and interventions need to be collaboratively defined with clients to ensure they are a cultural fit, and (6) Counsellors and career practitioners may need to go beyond traditional roles to change systems and policies (e.g., advocacy, social justice). Mark Pope has recently developed a model for work with underserved populations; Fred Leung has similarly written on a “Cultural Accommodation Model of Counseling.”
5. **Expect the unexpected.** It’s commonly understood that we live in times of unprecedented change. Not surprisingly, current career theories and models take that into account. Krumboltz has expanded his learning theory of career development to include the notion of happenstance in his recent “[Happenstance Learning Theory](#).” He offers 10 steps for working within this model: (1) Clarify the goal, (2) Communicate empathic understanding, (3) Brainstorm next steps, (4) Email or text report of action, (5) Positively reinforce action, (6) Overcome fear of making mistakes, (7) Measure counseling success through real-world accomplishments, (8) Save evidence of success for political purposes, (9) Offer periodic check-ups, and (10) Encourage further research.

Bright and Pryor’s [Chaos Theory of Careers \(CTC\)](#) similarly focuses on supporting career development despite unpredictable economic, social, political environments. Although technically a systems theory (more on those in concept 8), an essential element of Chaos Theory is the continuous interplay between stability and change. The 4 key concepts of CTC include: (1) Complexity – careers are influenced by countless dynamic, interconnected influences, both external and internal, (2) Change – as Bright and Pryor delight to point out, “Shift Happens,” whether slow or fast, (3) Chance – similar to Krumboltz’ work with Happenstance, Bright and Pryor see chance as the norm, not the exception, so important to address in career discussions, and (4) Construction – similar to many of the constructionist/constructivist theories to be covered in concept 7, Bright and Pryor see individuals as active agents in creating their futures.

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info@lifestrategies.ca
www.lifestrategies.ca

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6. **Change is an event . . .** Transition is a process. Many of the current theories address the impact of change and transition, but some theories have made that their focus. [William Bridges](#) has identified 3 zones for transitions: Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning. Bridges suggests that a change “event” (e.g., job loss or birth of a baby) precipitates a transition process, where one needs to focus first on getting closure from the past, then spend time in a period of creative uncertainty (the neutral zone), before being ready to begin something new.

Nancy Schlossberg also considers transitions. However, her [4S System](#) for Coping with Transitions identifies the dynamic nature of the situation, self, supports, and strategies. Each of these 4 elements will be different for every individual. Therefore, in supporting career change, it’s important to consider the dynamic system within which the individual is embedded.

7. **Careers are constructed.** There are many current career theories that fall under a general umbrella of career construction or career constructiveness. Vance [Peavy’s Socio-Dynamic](#) theory is one such example. Cochran’s work with narratives and story is another. Young’s Action theory (linked with Amundson’s Active Engagement approaches) both argue for counselling within the real world, attending to an individual’s life and social context. Savickas draws from traditional and emerging theories with his Career Construction Approach, defining that the matching theories (he refers to them as differential), play a significant role when one is choosing a career; then the developmental theories are useful when clients are transitioning through their developmental cycles. He finds the narrative, constructionist approaches useful later as clients later make meaning from the stories they’ve authored (i.e., as their careers continue to change over time).

8. **Systems are dynamic.** Many theories take a systems approach, recognizing that individuals are embedded within complex and constantly changing systems that impact their lives and careers. McMahon and Patton, in their [Systems Theory Framework](#) of Career Development present a metatheoretical framework that values the previous work on theories and integrates them in a coherent framework of career influences (e.g., individual characteristics, changing social organizations and context, and chance events). Similarly to constructivist models, stories are key to understanding individuals’ career issues within their context.

Similarly, Canadians [Redekoop and Magnusson](#) take an integrated systems approach to their conceptualization of “coherent career practice.” They identify four core elements: (1) Career Literacy, (2) Career Gumption, (3) Career Context, and (4) Career Integrity, and suggest that if any element is either undeveloped or disconnected from the others, career issues result.

9. **Career Responsiveness.** Neault coined the term “[Career Responsiveness](#)” to describe the types of theories and models evolving in the new millennium. Career responsiveness involves a constant interaction between individuals and their environments. Csikszentmihalyi’s [Flow](#) theory recognizes that “flow” or optimal experience is largely matching skills to challenge (i.e., as skills develop, challenge needs to increase to keep work interesting; as skills [or resources / capacity] diminish, less challenge is manageable and the environment needs to become less demanding for flow to occur). Neault’s [Machu Picchu](#) model incorporates this notion of balance, recognizing that there are times in one’s career where downshifting, pausing, or taking a lateral transfer make the most sense – for now, also, and as a positioning strategy for the long term. In Career Flow, a recent book by Niles, Amundson, and Neault, the career flow model similarly recognizes an ongoing interaction between individuals and their environments.
10. **Employee Engagement** There’s an emerging role for career practitioners to play within the workforce. Pickerell’s Employee Engagement model helps to conceptualize 4 elements that contribute to engagement: Appreciation, Contribution, Commitment, and Alignment. Interventions may be required in any of these elements in order to maximize an individual’s career success and job satisfaction.

These 10 key concepts are intended to provide an overview of current career theories and models. Some, more than others, will be a fit for the individual you’re working with, your mandate, and your personal style. You’re encouraged to read more about these theoretical approaches to help you better conceptualize the client issues that you encounter, regardless of your role or workplace setting.

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info@lifestrategies.ca
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