Going Beyond Traditional Career Development Theories: Individualizing Counseling Using Cognitive Stage and Experiential Learning Theories

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Abstract

William Perry's cognitive stage development and David Kolb's experiential learning theories provide complementary theoretical frameworks, that when used with traditional career development theories, provide a holistic approach to career counseling. In this article the authors explain how these theories can be used to better understand their clients' developmental needs in order to individualize the career development process.

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During the many years that we have been doing career development work, we have asked ourselves why some clients seem to be highly engaged and self-directed in their work, while others look to us for direction and answers. Why do some manage the ambiguity of the career development process well, while others find the lack of clarity and ambiguity unbearable? Why do some genuinely enjoy engaging in the journey of self-discovery, while others seem to resist new ideas and ways of understanding themselves in the world of work? Why do some relish the possibilities of ideas, but have difficulty making decisions, while some want to jump right into the decision-making process without careful reflection? These responses seem to occur unrelated to age, gender, and socioeconomic level. These situations that challenge our clients reflect cognitive attributes that may cause them to experience stress and anxiety when engaged in career counseling.

We have looked to existing career development theories, particularly those that deal with vocational personality and environment (Holland, 1976), development (Super, 1953), and social learning (Krumboltz, 1979) to explain these differences. These founding, well-respected theories have informed career development practice for many years, but they are based on thinking from the modern industrial era and, as such, focus primarily on the career development needs of white middle class men in traditional organizational systems (Savickas, 2003). Our inability to fully understand our clients through traditional theory alone has led us to explore the use of both cognitive stage development and experiential learning theories to help inform our career counseling, advising and teaching. To that end we have found that Perry's cognitive stage development theory and Kolb's experiential learning theory complement these existing theories and provide additional insights and perspectives into how our diverse clients acquire and integrate career information.

Cognitive Stage Development Theory

Among the best known adult cognitive development models are Kohlberg's, Loevenger's and Perry's (1969, 1966, 1999). In our work, we have found Perry's (1999) theory to be highly useful because of its focus on adult stage development. Cognitive stage development theory posits that people advance through stages of cognitive development sequentially, developmentally and predictably. Depending on the clients' levels, there are qualitative differences in the way they approach and make sense of their world. To that end, career development professionals should take a client's level of cognitive stage development into account when counseling or advising (Knefelkamp & Sleptiza, 1976).

William Perry, who studied the cognitive development of college students at Harvard in the 1950's and 1960's, found that students go through four stages (with nine overlapping positions), of intellectual and ethical development, initially seeing knowledge as simplistic and dualistic, and progressing to a level where their view of the world and themselves is highly complex and contextual and where they see knowledge as actively constructed by themselves based on their existing cognitive structures. He called these stages Dualism, Multiplicity, Relativism and Commitment (Perry, 1999) as illustrated in Figure 1.

Although one might justifiably question the generalizability of Perry's model to the work we do with adult clients of both genders, researchers such as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) studied women with a wide range of ages and socioeconomic levels and found similar developmental stages. Knefelkamp & Sleptiza (1976),
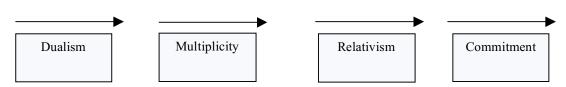

Figure 1.

students of Perry's, adapted his stages and positions to provide a model that could be used in career development.

Use of Perry's Theory in Career Development

In the *Dualism Stage* clients sees the world in "right and wrong" terms. Believing there is only one "right" career path for them, they rely on authorities to provide the "right" answers. In our role as career counselors, we are often asked by clients in this stage to tell them which career path they ought to follow.

Position 1: Clients rely completely on an external authority to answer their question, "What is the right career for me?" and then expect the authority to provide the "right" answer to their question. The decision is unexamined; there is no self-processing.

Position 2: Clients begin to believe that there can be right and wrong career decisions, which causes them to have anxiety. Dissonance ensues, which causes the client to question the counselor as the right authority. Still engaging in dichotomous thinking, the client has little understanding of how to make decisions.

Clients' thinking in the *Multiplicity Stage* is more cognitively complex and they begin to realize the possibility of making right and wrong decisions, causing considerable dissonance for them, fearing that they will make the wrong decision. To minimize this risk clients rely on the counselor for help in using the appropriate decision making process.

Position 3: Clients come to believe that there is an increased possibility that they can make right or wrong career decisions and that the process of making good decisions is quite complex. This creates anxiety for them. While they have seen others find satisfying careers and hope they can too, they have also seen others make decisions that have led to unsatisfying ones and believe this can happen to them as well. They have confidence that the correct decision making process will lead them to the right career. This process consists of many ele-

ments, including examination of their own identity. Thus, they begin to see career decision making as a process involving both external authorities and knowledge of self.

Position 4: Clients believe there are several possible good choices and use a decision making process that weighs the factors, hoping prioritization will lead them to the right choice. They begin to understand the role of self in decision-making but view the role of external influences such as the counselor, family, the job market, and even what their assessment tests suggest as more important.

In the *Relativism* Stage, clients move from an external to internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966). The counselor is no longer the authority to provide the right answer, but rather becomes a resource. Clients see many legitimate career possibilities and use an objective and analytical process that meets their needs in making a decision, for which they take responsibility.

Position 5: Clients in this stage begin exploring, using a process they create for themselves with the guidance of a counselor. They begin to use their analysis of self to systematically examine various career possibilities. They take ownership for the decisions they make that result from this careful analysis.

Position 6: Clients begin to experience chaos from examining all the alternatives and realize that in order to eliminate this chaos they must choose, even though they do not see themselves as ready to do so. Knefelkamp and Sleptiza (1976) describe this as a reflective stage where people consider the consequences of making a decision and confront the responsibility that goes with doing so.

In the *Commitment* Stage, clients take greater responsibility for the career decision making process, analyzing and synthesizing complex information. They begin to see career choice as a commitment of self, moving initially from fear of narrowing their choices to viewing the decision as one that allows them to join a new world. They begin to inte-

grate career choice as part of their self-identity.

Position 7: Early in this position clients fear being defined by the role they have chosen. Later, however, they come to understand that they themselves define their own role and affirm their decision.

Position 8: Clients examine the consequences, both pleasant and unpleasant, of the commitment they have made in their career choice. They are challenged to reconsider that which has led to the choice, such as their values, to reconfirm their self identity- who they are, what their beliefs are, and what they will do with their lives.

Position 9: Clients in this position have clear knowledge of who they are. They reach out to the outer world, seeking out challenges in order to widen their knowledge and learn new things in an effort to attain their full potential.

We have found knowledge of our clients' stages and positions allows us to customize our counseling approach to allow for differences in intellectual processing and meaning making, thus allowing for more developmentally appropriate counseling approaches.

Experiential Learning Theory

In our work with clients and students we have also seen significant differences in how they learn from their experiences. Because career development is a learning process, we examined how differing learning styles affect the counseling process.

Perry (1999), Piaget (1969), Friere (1970), Dewey (1958) and Lewin (1951) stressed that the heart of all learning lies in the way we process experience, in particular, our critical reflection of experience. To that end, we have found experiential learning theory, as developed by David Kolb, complementary to cognitive stage development and helpful in informing our career development work. Kolb's experiential learning theory is consistent with Perry's model of how people learn, grow and develop; both believe the ability to learn from experience is a highly important life long skill. Experiential learning theory posits that learning is a

holistic process of adaptation to the world "whereby knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, p. 41). The process of experiential learning depicts two dialectical modes for grasping experience; Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AE), and two dialectical modes for transforming experience; Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). Experiential learning theory portrays a continuous cycle involving these four distinctive learning modes for processing experience as depicted in figure 2. Present tangible experiences are the basis for thoughtful reflections; in turn, these are assimilated into essential meaning as expressed in abstracted concepts. From this derived meaning new implications for action can be drawn and intentionally experimented with in the shaping of new experiences. For holistic learning to occur, it is necessary to go through all of the phases of Kolb's learning cycle. Learning thus proceeds as a result of the utilization of the four adaptive modes.

To be effective, learners require all four different abilities depicted in the experiential learning cycle model. A learner will choose the appropriate learning abilities needed depending upon the specific situation. *Concrete Experience* is the mode in which experi-ences are grasped through reliance on the tangible, felt sensing qualities of immediate experience, such as that coming from an informational interview or the first day on a new job. Others perceive new information through *Abstract Conceptualization,* relying on conceptual understanding, symbolic representation, and analysis of ideas such as analyzing and synthesizing one's skills, interests and values. Similarly, in transforming dialectical modes some of us tend to reflect on our actions and carefully watch others in the process while seeking to understand and derive meaning from the experience from different perspectives in *Reflective Observation*. A client asking for feedback about one's abilities or clarifying one's values and priorities in life are examples of this reflective mode. Others choose *Active Experimentation* where they are action oriented and initiate or involve themselves in activities such as scheduling meetings for informational interviews or doing an internship. While each of these dimensions is an independent mode of grasping experience, in combination their emphasis on the development of learning produces the highest level of learning (Kolb, 1984).
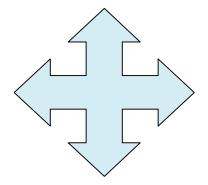
Truly effective learners are able to rely flexibly on the four learning modes in whatever combination the situation requires of the individual. Having de-veloped skills in each area, a client can call on any one of them as needed. While this may be the ideal, Kolb (1976, 1984) theorized that while every individual utilizes each mode to some extent, each has a preferred mode of learning resulting from the tendency to either learn through Concrete Experience, Abstract Conceptualization, Reflective Observation or Active Experimentation.

We believe that experiential learning theory works well in conjunction with cognitive stage development theory and concur with William Perry's (1999) belief that multiple theories are needed to explain the complexity of human learning and meaning making. Indeed Kolb (1984) himself felt that experiential learning theory complements Perry's theory of cognitive stage development.

Early theories of cognitive development, including those developed by Piaget, Kohlberg, Loevenger and Perry presented development as a linear, sequential process. We believe one of the major shortcomings of these theories is that they do not explain the process of moving from one stage to the next. While Perry reports his findings about college students' experience as moving from stages of "dualism" to "commitment", experiential learning theory frames the developmental process by

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE
"Feeling"

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION
"Doing"

REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION
"Watching"

ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION
"Thinking"

Figure 2.

which one moves to increasingly complex stages.

Kolb's cyclical model enriches Perry's linear theory by integrating the experiential learning process as a means of understanding cognitive growth and development. Kolb describes learning as a dynamic process, allowing for a more holistic way of understanding and working with individuals as they move through their stages of development. Kolb's model is not an alternative to Perry's, but rather a complementary framework that addresses cognition, experience, perception, and behavior, thereby embellishing our understanding of personal development; used together they provide a more powerful and useful guide to the understanding of individual growth and development than can either alone. While Perry's theory moves us through increasingly complex stages of intellectual development, Kolb's theory provides a way to understand the deeper level learning necessary to prepare one to enter subsequent stages of cognitive development (see figure 3). In this way the client incorporates earlier learning from experience into a new, higher level of cognitive functioning, much the way we might envision a helix.

Use of Kolb's Theory in Career Development

When one or more of the four learning abilities are underdeveloped or overlooked, holistic learning may be blocked. And, since career development entails a learning process, the inability to use all of these dimensions may well impede client successes in achieving goals. Over utilization of a preferred mode, or under development of another, can lead to incomplete learning in the career development process. Career de-

velopment professionals who understand clients' experiential learning preferences can capitalize on them, while encouraging the strengthening of under-developed modes of learning.

When Reflection predominates over Abstract Conceptualization, clients may enjoy gathering a considerable amount of information, but find it challenging to analyze it and make a decision. Clients who are strongest in Abstract Conceptualization may find it rewarding to assimilate disparate facts gathered into a solid plan for action and yet they may have difficulty carrying through with their good intentions because they fear taking risks. Another pitfall of relying on the Abstract Conceptualization mode is that clients may embark on a career without regard for how well it fits their personal values and individual needs.

Others may find it challenging to immerse themselves in an experience, but have difficulty reflecting upon its meaning and significance. For example, one client might rush into an opportunity to act on a career decision without gaining adequate information or reflecting upon the personal value of that information. When Reflective Observation predominates at the expense of other modes for learning from experience, clients may have a flood of ideas, but be unable to make a decision to move forward with a plan of action. When Active Experimentation predominates in the extreme, clients may have a history of making the same mistakes over and over again, neglecting reflection upon the experience as part of a learning process to transform their experience. We so often see clients who participate in numerous interviews without a resulting job offer; this may be attributed to failure to reflect on the effectiveness of their interviewing skills and

demeanor. Or consider clients who fail to recognize their need for working in a collaborative environment and who have a succession of jobs that consistently isolate them from others. In these and similar other situations, a counselor's intervention could guide clients to greater integration of experience by encouraging reflection, thus aiding their development towards a higher level of cognitive functioning. In this regard, feedback processes from a counselor would seek to counter an imbalance between observation and action, either from a tendency for an individual to emphasize decision and action at the expense of information gathering, or from a tendency to become bogged down by data collection and analysis at the expense of risk taking. Ultimately, a holistic learning process seeks to counter ineffective tendencies by promoting higher-order purposeful action to achieve personally directed goals.

Information about clients' preferred modes of learning can inform career counselors in designing an individualized strategy and methodology that enhances their learning and facilitates growth in cognitive development. For example, clients whose strengths are in concrete experience will have a preference for learning through job shadowing and internships, feedback and discussion, and career coaching. On the other hand, clients whose learning strengths are abstract conceptualization will learn best by conducting their own research about their career options and welcome guidance by a counselor who has knowledge about occupations and asks thought provoking questions.

It is important for us to recognize, however, that the comfort with which clients engage in typical career development activities will depend on their
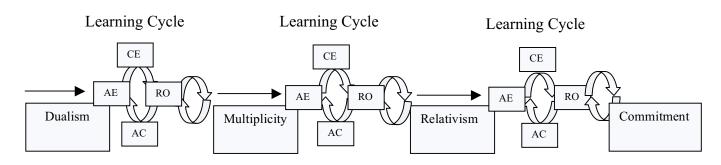

Figure 3.

stage of cognitive development. Thus, clients in the early stages of cognitive development whose dominant mode of learning is abstract conceptualization will not eagerly pursue a higher order activity such as conducting research until they have developed the sense of personal agency found in later stages.

Conclusion

As we learn more about cognitive stage development and experiential learning theory, it becomes increasingly apparent to us that our clients enter career counseling at many different developmental levels and with different strengths and styles of learning. We believe that a comprehensive career development approach will enable them to engage in a career development process that takes their stages of cognitive development and their experiential learning preferences into consideration. We believe Perry's cognitive stage development and Kolb's experiential learning theories when used together, and in conjunction with traditional career development theories, provide career counselors with a holistic, integrative, individualized approach to career counseling that can successfully be used with traditional career development theories. Thus, experiential learning theory and cognitive stage development theory provide additional lenses through which we may understand our clients. However, conducting research using the Learning Styles Inventory (Kolb, 1999) and the Learning Environment Preferences (LEP) (Moore, 1987) would provide empirical data about the usefulness of these theories in practice. Nonetheless, we believe using these theories in counseling not only maximizes the likelihood of successful career outcomes, but perhaps as importantly engages clients in a developmental experience that promotes a higher level of cognitive functioning.

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