

# Career Development and Human Capital Theory: Preaching the “Education Gospel”

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## Abstract

This chapter analyses the relationship between career development, education, and human capital theory. It argues that education lies at the heart of our understanding of how individuals develop their careers and how purposeful career development interventions can support them in this endeavour. Career development services are most evident and accessible in the education system. This relationship is not accidental but is rooted in both the historical development of the field and in the importance of human capital theory to the ideology of both education and career development. The chapter finishes by critiquing the dependence of policymakers and advocates for the field on human capital theory and by considering alternative relationships that could be built between education and career development.

**Keywords:** career development, education, human capital, human capital theory, public policy

## Introduction

The concept of career, in the sense that it is employed in this volume, yokes together work (in both paid and unpaid forms), education and learning, and other forms of purposeful activity undertaken by individuals, such as civic participation and engagement in family. It describes how individuals spend their time across their life course and, once the concept of ‘career development’ is introduced, suggests that individual agency can exert at least some influence over how the life course unfolds. While this broad definition underpins much writing in career development (Super, 1980; Watts, 2015a), in practice, as in the popular understanding of career, the focus is often shifted to the context of paid work through the use of concepts like work-related learning, employer engagement, and employability. This economic framing of the idea of career connects with human capital theory, which also frames the purpose of education in economic terms (see Percy & Dodd, this volume). This chapter explores how the economic framing of education and career has shaped the forms that career development interventions take, and the chapter provides both a critique and alternative approaches.

## Why Is Education Important for Career?

Participation in education, and particularly in formal education that leads to recognised qualifications, has become a principal route through which people seek personal advancement. A wider range of literature, which is often described as ‘human capital theory’, has taken note of this and has expended a lot of effort in documenting and theorising the relationship between education, salary, and wider life chances. Becker (2009, p. 15) argued that education, ‘schooling, a computer training course... and lectures on the virtues of punctuality and honesty’, should be viewed as ‘capital’, with an equivalence to having money in the bank or owning stocks and shares, in that they are investments that individuals make that offer returns for that individual.

The terminology of ‘capital’ has become widespread across a range of disciplines and is variously deployed by Bourdieu (1986) and Hirschi (2012)—with some conceptual relationships between the different theories and uses of ‘capital’. However, human capital theory has a distinct epistemology from theories associated with Bourdieusian capital theory and Hirschi’s psychological capital/career resources model. This chapter focuses on human capital theory and discusses its history, intellectual basis, and use by policymakers.

Evidence for human capital theory can be found in a number of places. For example, there is an observable association between qualification levels and lifetime earnings that, as data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) presented in Figure 1 shows, holds true across most countries.

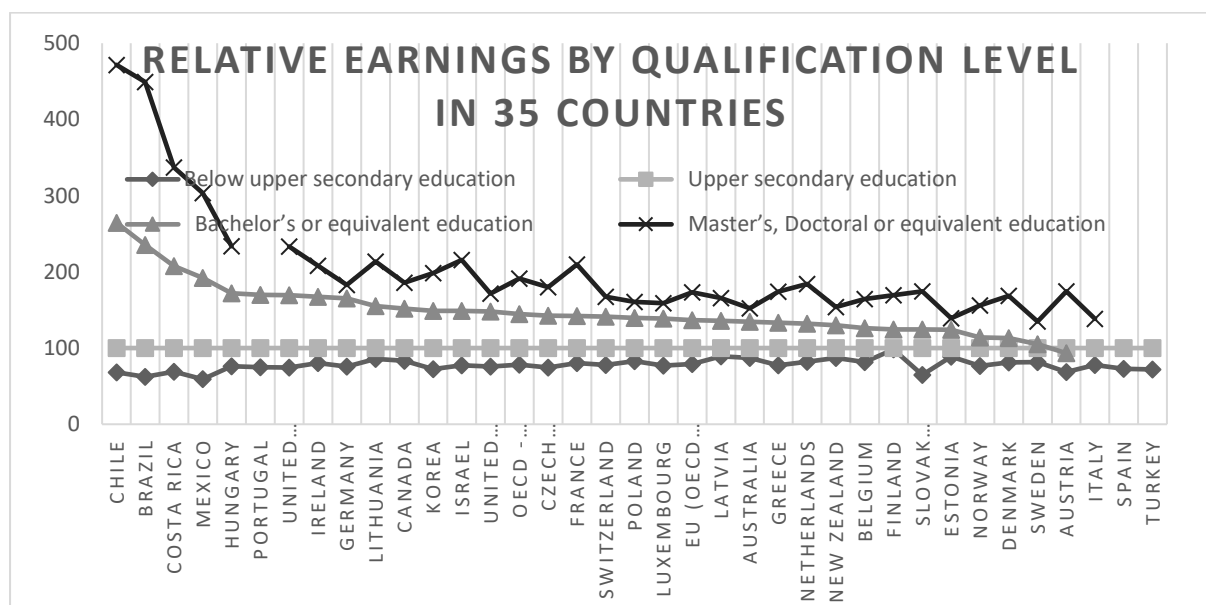


Figure 1: Relative earnings by qualification level in 35 countries. Data from OECDStats. (2019).

In Figure 1, national average salaries for people whose highest level of qualification is upper secondary education are indexed to 100. The figure shows how those with other levels of qualification compare in terms of what they earn. In all but a very small number of countries, the headline relationship is straightforward; the more qualifications you have, the more you earn.

Other research has pointed out that beyond the level of averages, such salary benefits are not equally distributed to all (Oliver, 2016). Individuals’ careers are not just shaped by the level of their qualifications, but also by the nature of the qualification and how organisations recognise and value qualifications. These also interact with wider demographic factors, meaning that, although higher qualifications are positively associated with earning power, they do not provide a perfect correlation

nor a certain route to career advancement. The end of this chapter looks at some of the critiques of the assumption that more education equals a better career, but the relationship between participation in the education system and career success, at least as far as can be measured by salary, is strong enough to serve as a heuristic. Grubb and Lazerson (2004) ironically referred to this heuristic as 'the education gospel'.

Under the influence of the education gospel, the role of career development interventions is to persuade individuals to 'stay in school' and garner more human capital. More subtly, it is to encourage people to make wise choices about the educational pathways that they should choose, with one eye on their own capabilities and the other on what the labour market demands. Hodkinson (2008) noted that there are problems with viewing career development as a process of rational 'investment choices' because career decision-making is not rational, it unfolds in a nonlinear way, and is influenced by actions, events, and circumstances that are beyond the control of the individual. But, as Hodkinson also showed, much policy and many career development interventions are developed with the aim of increasing the rationality of individual's investment choices.

Career development and education are connected beyond the signalling power of qualifications and a view of education as an investment to enhance earning power. Education develops skills and knowledge that may be useful in the workplace or in other parts of life, it builds self-awareness, it affords space for self-exploration and the testing of personal capabilities, and it allows people to discover more about the world and to consider their place within it. Even where formally constituted career development interventions are absent, all education offers the possibility of supporting and informing career development, especially if 'career' is defined as encompassing more than just paid work.

Such thinking moves between different conceptions of what both education and career are. On the one hand, education can be viewed as being informed by a technocratic rationality (Sultana, 2014) and providing a series of technical and behavioural trainings that are designed to fit individuals for the workplace, to increase productivity, and to maximise earning potential. On the other hand, when viewed through the lens of a developmental rationality, which Sultana (2014, p. 16) argued addresses human beings' interests in 'securing and extending possibilities of understanding oneself and others in the conduct of life', education is addressed to self-actualisation and personal growth, which can then be enacted and continued through an expansive notion of career as a personal journey.

### Career Development Intervention as Educational Action

Learning is a fundamental aspect of all living things and is how they discover their environment, adapt to it, and interact with it. Education is purposeful interventions that are made to facilitate learning. In the early 20th century, the progressive educator John Dewey argued that 'as societies become more complex in structure and resources, the need of formal or intentional teaching and learning increases' (2004, p. 9). As individuals deal with increasing complexity, they need more help and support to navigate the social structures and to formulate their responses to them. Such responses rely on the acquisition of both knowledge about how things work and the skills required to operationalise that knowledge and to turn it into meaningful action.

Viewed in this sense, career development interventions are clearly educational in nature. Such an association is most obvious when viewing the tradition of interventions that are described as career education (Barnes, this volume; Law & Watts, 2015; McCash, 2006; Patton, 2005; Sultana, this volume). Such interventions use the recognisable 'grammar' or set of rules, assumptions, and practices of education: defining curricula, identifying a teacher or tutor, setting tasks and activities to

facilitate engagement with knowledge and the development of skills, and assessing, often informally, the outcomes of these activities.

There is another important tradition in career development work that is less obviously 'educational'. This tradition views careers work as a form of counselling and in some cases as a form of therapy (Burwell & Chen, 2006; Shefer, 2018) or, in a related but distinct tradition, as a form of coaching (Yates, 2013). Such traditions are typically focused on one-to-one interactions and do not draw on the same grammar as career education (Bassot, this volume; Whiston, this volume). However, in the sense that Dewey is describing it, they remain educational interventions. Counselling and coaching activities are purposeful interventions that support those who participate in them to learn about themselves and the world and to consider how best to engage and interact with that world. Such one-to-one interventions draw on a different grammar, which includes contracting, building the working alliance, active listening, and homework activities. Although the activities look different, they are seeking a common end, which is to help the individual to learn about and take agency in their career.

This is not to argue that the educational lens is the only way in which career development interventions can be viewed. It would be equally possible to draw out the therapeutic aspects of career education. However, the point is to recognise that career development interventions do not just encourage individuals to engage with education, but that they are in and of themselves educative. This educative dimension is heightened and emphasised by the fact that career development interventions are most commonly located within, or close to, the formal education system.

### Career Development as Part of the Education System

The history of education has developed in dialogue with work and career (Watts, 2015b). From its origins, the career and vocational strand has been an important component of formal education. Given this close relationship, it is unsurprising that politicians and employers have repeatedly asked whether the education system could be better aligned to employment. One consequence of this has been the creation of a range of career development services across a wide range of countries (McCarthy & Borbély-Pecze, this volume; Watts, 2014).

At the core of career development work's relationship to education is its organisational location within, or adjacent to, the formal education system (OECD, 2004). Career development services can be found in several organisational locations, notably in public employment services, as a private-sector service paid for by the individual, and in the workplace, either through the human resource management function of firms or, in some countries, through trade unions. However, in most countries, career development services are concentrated within the education system, including schools, the vocational education and training system, higher education, and adult education (Hooley, 2014).

Career development programmes and interventions are always encountered in a context that shapes their natures and aims. In most cases, the context is an educational institution and the politics, funding, aims, culture, and internal dynamics of that institution act on and shape the kinds of career development programmes and services that are available. Key to this is the attempt to align the processes and outputs of the education system with the needs of employers and the labour market. This relationship is in turn shaped by the societal role that education is expected to play in the economy as a producer of what is often described as 'human capital'.

## Human Capital Theory

Underpinning much of the way that the value of education and career development education is understood by policymakers and many others in the field is the concept of human capital. Human capital theory was developed in the early 1960s as a way of understanding why the level of physical resources available (from coal to machinery) fails to fully explain organisational performance or national productivity (McCracken, McIvor, Treacy, & Wall, 2017). Human capital theory recognised that people are an important resource for organisations and countries and that different people add varying amounts of economic value, depending on their knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes. Crucially, the theory also recognises that human beings can develop through education and experience. Because of its economic frame of reference, human capital theory views the process of human development as the production of human capital through a process of investment in education and training.

Schultz (1961), one of the originators of human capital theory, recognised the moral complexity of what he was proposing. Schultz (1961, p. 2) wrote, 'To treat human beings as a wealth that can be augmented by investment runs counter to deeply held values. It seems to reduce man once again to some material component, something akin to property'. To conceive of human beings as capital and education as investment inevitably diminishes people and education, rooting the value of both in technocratic and economic rationalities. But, despite these reservations, Schultz maintained that 'by investing in themselves, people can enlarge the range of choice available to them. It is one way free men [sic] can enhance their welfare'. The international OECD data presented at the start of this chapter suggest, that at least in some ways, Schultz and the human capital theorists appear to be right and the promise of the 'education gospel' has been realised.

The philosophical dilemma that Schultz faced in the formation of human capital theory has been at the heart of debates in the field ever since. Human capital theory locates the desired outcome of education as economic value and uses the imagery of money (financial capital) to clarify how education can support the development of career and the production of wider forms of social and economic value. People invest their time and money in education to accumulate human capital, which can ultimately be converted into other forms of capital, such as money and goods. Paid work provides the means through which this exchange takes place.

Where career development services can be interpolated into this process of capital accumulation and exchange, they offer a unique additional component to human capital theory. If education is a form of investment, then career development services exist to provide advice about investment choices. What course should an individual follow, how much is this likely to be worth over a lifetime, and how can the investment best be realised? In this sense, Watts and Sultana (2015) argued that career development services act as Adam Smith's famous 'invisible hand of the market' made manifest, by supporting individuals to make wise and informed decisions on the educational market and to invest their human capital effectively. In his history of the origins of career development services, Stephens (1970, p. xiv) argued that it was exactly this logic that was responsible for career development services' original position within the education system, noting that 'in the name of social and economic efficiency... the youth who has been carefully trained would also have to be carefully counselled into a suitable occupational niche'.

In addition, career development education also fosters the acquisition of specialised kinds of human capital that are associated with individuals' participation in the labour market. So, career development professionals are not just acting as investment advisers, but also schooling individuals in the skills and knowledge that they will need to become wise investors. The development of these

‘career management skills’ and ‘employability skills’ has become a key aim of career guidance policy, and such skills are expected to underpin individuals’ capacity to become self-reliant (Sultana, 2012).

Human capital theory provides an explanation of how wealth is created that is useful for individuals but it is at the level of policy that the theory has had its most explicit influence (Baptiste, 2001). Fitzsimons (2017) argued that ‘human capital theory is the most influential economic theory of Western education, setting the framework of government policies since the early 1960s’ and noted that ‘it is seen increasingly as a key determinant of economic performance’. In this sense, its influence extends beyond the propositions outlined by Schultz, Becker, and the other theorists, towards a broader ideology that places education and the development of human capital at the heart of the effective functioning of neoliberalism. This ideology can be found most clearly in the politics and policies of ‘third way’ reforming neoliberals during the 1990s and 2000s, who advocated for lifelong learning as a part of both educational and economic policy. Tony Blair summarised the policy case for human capital theory in his conference speech 2 years before he became the British Prime Minister.

*I present to you today our proposals to equip our people and businesses for new technological and economic challenges, to change the basis of this country's thinking of the past 100 years. Education is the best economic policy there is for a modern country and it is in the marriage of education and technology that the future lies. The arms race may be over; the knowledge race has begun and we will never compete on the basis of a low-wage, sweat shop economy. It cannot be done that way. We have one asset—our people, their intelligence, their potential. Develop it, we succeed, neglect it, we fail. It is as simple as that and the pace of technological change means that this task is urgent.*

*(Blair, 1995)*

In this speech, Blair also addressed two of the key features of human capital theory that emerged under the influence of the OECD in the 1980s (Baptiste, 2001): first, the idea that an educated populace will be more flexible and adaptive to change, and, second, that they will be better at making use of new technologies. Not only does human capital add economic value, but also it acts as a multiplier to the value added by technologies and inoculates people against negative outcomes associated with automation and technological development.

Since Blair’s speech, human capital theory has continued to be a highly influential strand of policy thinking across the globe. Holborow (2012) expressed some surprise that the ideas associated with human capital theory have continued to hold sway following the global financial crash in 2008, when many other neoliberal ideas have been discredited. For example, in a paper for the European Commission, Redecker et al. (2011) linked the idea of investment in human capital to the ideas of career management, arguing that ‘professional careers will become more flexible and dynamic and all citizens, no matter how highly qualified, will need to proactively design and promote their careers by seizing relevant training opportunities’ (p. 10). Bengtsson (2011) argued that, within the European Union, formal career development services have increasingly been placed at the heart of European human capital strategy. Career development interventions are useful to policymakers because they can help to advocate for the value of education, support people in their interaction with the education system, and alert them to the labour market value of different educational options.

The ideology of human capital theory places a burden of responsibility on individuals, who must commit to ongoing investment in their skills and knowledge throughout life. Human capital is not just built up, it can also erode as the world changes, rendering previous learning less useful. It can even be subject to dramatic collapses, as when an industry shuts down and highly developed knowledge and skills within that sector suddenly become worthless. In this scenario, accessing education and committing to learning become the individual's best strategy to ensure that their career development can be maintained. Career development services have the potential to become invaluable parts of this social and economic quest for human capital because they can help to socialise individuals into becoming lifelong learners, orientate them to the key shifts in the labour market, and help them to prepare to make shifts, often by committing to further human capital development through participation in the formal education system.

Many of the attempts to build a policy rationale for investment in career development have explicitly made use of human capital theory. Mayston (2002) argued that career guidance can help to reduce the risks of investment in human capital to individuals, Hooley and Dodd (2015) described the development of human capital as one of the key individual outcomes of participating in career development, and Bernes, Bardick, and Orr (2007) argued that a key aim of research in the field must be to strengthen the case that career development interventions have an observable impact on human capital development.

Human capital theory has been demonstrated to be a good fit with the field of career development. Individuals need human capital to advance their careers, and the process of accessing career development interventions both acts as a guide on how to develop human capital and facilitates the development of specialised forms of human capital, such as career management skills and employability skills. Furthermore, this relationship is both recognised by policymakers and valued by them as contributing to economic policy aims. However, despite the convenience of human capital as an organising framework, there are also problems with it that need to be acknowledged.

### Critiques of Human Capital Theory

There are a range of important critiques of human capital theory that lead away from viewing participation in education as a process of investment for financial gain. Such critiques inevitably lead to possible alternative roles for career development. Critiques fall into two main categories: first, there are concerns that the simple relationship between education and economic growth proposed by human capital theory is overstated. This perspective argues that the benefits promised by human capital theory often fail to materialise even when countries follow the 'education gospel'. Second, there are a range of political, ethical, and philosophical objections about the way in which human capital theory shapes human subjects, the education system, and the field of career development.

Wolf (2002) made several explicit attacks on the logic and evidence behind human capital theory. In particular, she challenged the idea that simply increasing the number of highly qualified individuals will lead to economic growth. Sending more people to university does not necessarily result in more or higher skilled employment. While a lack of skills might be a drag on economic growth, a surplus of skills is unlikely to drive growth. Baptiste (2001) made a similar point, noting that despite many developing economies' investing heavily in education as a (human capital theory informed) route to development, they did not have economies that were able to capitalise on their newly educated populations. As Brown and Lauder (2006) argued, a highly skilled populace does not seem to act as a 'magnet' for jobs, in part because many countries are pursuing similar education policies and so it is difficult to get ahead, and in part because knowledge-intensive industries often do not create that many jobs. Such arguments trouble some of the economic rationales for investing in career



development as a stimulus for human capital development and suggest that there might be limits on the returns for such investments.

Wolf was also scathing about the way in which qualifications are used as a proxy for real skills or economically valuable attributes. It is relatively easy for government to invent new forms of qualification and to push citizens through such qualifications, but if employers do not value the skills developed through these qualifications, they offer limited returns on people's investments. This critique is worrying because career development services are often asked to take a proactive role in engaging learners with new forms of qualifications and other educational reforms (Watts, 2010). Such initiatives directly co-opt career professionals into preaching the education gospel as a part of human-capital-inspired policy. This is possible in part because government provides the bulk of the funding for career development services and so has some capacity to set the objectives for such services.

Finally, Wolf also called into question the alignment between individual labour market success and macroeconomic outcomes. Just because individuals who access education earn more than those who do not (see Figure 1) does not necessarily mean that more education leads to economic growth. It may simply provide a way to understand inequality within societies. Education may not be an absolute good (the more you have, the better off you are) in the way the human capital theorists describe, it may be a positional good (if you have more than someone else, you will be better off than they are). Again, this raises an important question for career development services because it places them in the position of reordering inequality by helping people to maximise their human capital rather than making everyone better off.

The recognition of the positional nature of human capital calls into question some of the economic promises made by human capital theory, but perhaps even more fundamentally, it also raises some major ethical and political issues. Viewed through this lens, career development interventions may in effect be providing some individuals with the tools to outperform others. If wise investment in human capital increases their chance of accessing the good life, it may simultaneously decrease other people's chance of doing the same because they find themselves at the bottom of the human capital ladder. This recalls Law's (2012) concern about viewing career as a race. In the human capital theory race, individuals are investing their resources wisely and building up their capacity to succeed (and beat others). So, the choice of a degree in science rather than one in creative therapies is likely to be rewarded with a high salary and a social and economic position that allows an individual to feel that they have won the race.

It is also important to think about the losers in this race. What happens to the person who fails to seek out career development support, to invest in the kind of education that brings a strong financial return, and ends up struggling to make ends meet? Human capital theorists would argue that such an individual should be helped to see the error of their ways and encouraged to redouble their efforts to do better in the race by making more and wiser investments in human capital. This process is what Rose (1990) and others working with Foucauldian ideas described as 'responsibilisation' and the creation of an idealised 'enterprising self'. Individuals are encouraged to view their lives and their careers as solely their responsibility and to ignore wider social and political factors. So, if you want a better life, you need to make better investments. This conception of human capital focuses attention on agentic choice-making and ignores how opportunities are structured in ways that make choices about one course or an alternative largely meaningless in terms of accessing the kinds of wealth, power, and opportunities that are preserved for the privileged (Roberts, 2009). Individuals begin with different amounts of capital to invest and their opportunities to increase their human capital are limited by the opportunity structure within which they operate (Hodkinson, 2008).



Placing all the responsibility for career onto individuals serves both to obscure the fact that they may have few opportunities to manage their career and side-steps the possibility that there may be social and political strategies, rather than individual ones, that might help them to access the good life.

Ironically, such responsabilisation is often dependent on state investment in the education system. Education spending is one area of public spending that neoliberal governments view as legitimate, because it can be used to simultaneously develop human capital and to foster a subjectivity that is conducive to free market competition. As the United Kingdom's Chancellor of the Exchequer argued in 2007:

*Only with investment in education can free markets, free trade and flexibility succeed. And the prize is enormous. If we can show people that by equipping themselves for the future they can be winners not losers in globalisation, beneficiaries of this era of fast moving change, then people will welcome open, flexible, free-trade and pro-competition economies as an emancipating force.*

*(Gordon Brown, quoted in Grant, 2009, p. xv)*

Brown's argument highlights the political and ideological nature of human capital theory and shows how this is layered onto the economic rationales. Education is not just about helping people to do well in their careers, it is also about helping them to realise what 'winning' is and to recognise that they can be 'winners'.

It is also possible to question whether salary can serve as a proxy for the value of skills. Human capital theory views skills as operating on one dimension (more or less), rather than the more heterogeneous view within which different people have different skills and knowledge that can be deployed for different purposes. The imposition of a binary scale on heterogeneous reality serves to impose a hierarchy that is ultimately useful in justifying an unequal class society. It argues that those who are paid less must have less human capital and therefore that they have invested their time and efforts unwisely. Such an analysis ignores the fact that it is not skill levels alone that determine salary. So, it would be possible to argue that a nurse has a similar (or perhaps greater) level of skill than a stockbroker and yet society rewards the latter over the former. Viewing this phenomenon through the lens of human capital theory misses most of what is going on, both in terms of the way in which capitalism rewards different occupations and in the way that access to such elite occupations is organised. Bowles and Gintis (1975, p. 82) summarised these critiques by arguing that human capital theory 'provides, in short, a good ideology for the defence of the status quo. But it is a poor science for understanding either the workings of the capitalist economy or the way towards an economic order more conducive to human happiness.'

From an ethical and political viewpoint, human capital theory has a number of problems. First, it offers positional advantage in a race, rather than necessarily increasing human flourishing. Second, it allocates responsibility for accessing the good life to the individual and bypasses social and structural causes for, and solutions to, career failures. Third, it buys into a normative logic where career success is conflated with salary. Finally, it also serves to diminish and narrow the idea of what both education and career are and are for.

Human capital theory views education as an investment that individuals make in themselves to advance their careers. In its policy formulation, education is viewed as an investment that governments or societies make in their economies. This results in a technocratic vision based around simple and predictable outcomes. Good education is defined as a course that leads the individual towards a better salary, and a good career is one in which the individual can attract a high salary.

Human endeavours and the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness are reduced to entries on a balance sheet.

Education, despite its co-option into human capital theory, has proved itself to be quite resistant to some of the theory's assumptions. Despite the increasing focus on employment outcomes and employability metrics, educators continue to view what they deliver as more than just the provision of knowledge that will maximise salary returns. As Watts (2015b, p. 15) argued, 'At its best, it [education] is concerned with the development of the individual's full range of abilities and aptitudes, with the cultivation of spiritual and moral values, with the nurturing of imagination and sensibility, with the transmission and reinterpretation of culture'. This is also true of career development interventions, which have drawn on a wide range of traditions beyond the technocratic and economistic rationalities emphasised by human capital theories (Sultana, 2014). Sultana highlighted the existence of both developmental and emancipatory rationalities within the career development field as alternative ways of thinking about what career development is trying to achieve. This expansive tradition emphasises education and career development's capacity to develop citizens, transform individuals' thinking, contribute to well-being and human flourishing, and, in more radical formations, contribute to social change (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018, 2019).

This chapter begins with a broad definition of career as the individual's journey through life, learning, and work. A journey in which paid work is likely to be an important element, but one in which time and energy are shared across a range of roles, which have been described by Super (1980) as child, student, leisurite, citizen, worker, spouse, homemaker, parent, and pensioner. It would be possible to critique Super's framework as heteronormative, ageist, and culturally specific, but the idea of career as a rainbow of different roles and relationships is a powerful one that it is worth hanging on to. Human capital theory bypasses all of this in favour of an economistic definition where career is conflated with paid work and its purpose is the generation of financial return.

### Moving Beyond Human Capital Theory

Many of the criticisms of human capital theory are strongly related to critiques that have been made of career development services and theories, such as the focus on agentic and individualised narratives about how careers work and the corresponding blindness to social and collective analyses (Hooley et al., 2018). Such a focus on the individual can seem to render the career development professional as an apolitical actor who is seeking only to help individuals to advance their own interests. But, career development services and career development policies have been co-opted into the ideology of human capital theory, and this very focus on the individual acts as a technology by which people are asked to buy into the discourses of meritocracy and individualism.

There is not room in this chapter to set out a complete alternative to the career development field's reliance on human capital theory. Such an alternative would need to include theoretical aspects (rethinking concepts like competencies and career management skills and challenging agentic assumptions), political aspects (recognising and critiquing the close association between human capital theory and neoliberalism), and tactical aspects (considering how the field can make a new case for funding and policy support that does not rely so heavily on human capital theory). There is also reason to be careful about entreaties to career development professionals to adopt emancipatory practices or to challenge human capital, when such professionals mainly operate within policy, funding, and managerial regimes that are shaped by the ideology of human capital theory. Challenging such regimes cannot be viewed as an individualistic choice about an approach to practice, as dissent is likely to result in discipline and sanction.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that career development practice and theory are not simply expressions of the ideology of human capital theory. Law (2012) argued that there is a need to try to deconstruct the metaphor of the (human capital fuelled) race that underpins so much of career theory, and to replace it with the metaphor of the journey. Journeys, he noted, like careers, are social, multifaceted, helped by cooperation, and able to simultaneously pursue multiple destinations. Such a metaphorical shift leads away from the economic framing of career encouraged by human capital theory. Career does not have to be essentially competitive and focused on achieving the highest financial return. It is possible to value and enjoy the experience of living and to move away from individualistic conceptions of what career success might be (see Robertson, this volume).

Untangling human capital theory from career development will not be easy, because it is buried deep in theory and practice and in the policies, funding, and regulatory frameworks that govern the field as well as in client expectations. Nonetheless, the critiques discussed in this chapter provide ample reason to attempt to resituate the field in ways that are less compliant to neoliberal rationalities. Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen (2018, 2019) argued that the political economy is in crisis and that it is time to move the career development field away from its reliance on neoliberal ideas like human capital theory. They argued that, instead of viewing career development as supporting wise investment choices and enabling people to win the race, career development should take a critical stance, seeking to demystify and transform the current opportunity structure. If it is to take such a role, career development work needs to help individuals develop a critical understanding of the world; name oppression; problematise norms, assumptions, and power relations; and build solidarity and take collective action.

Given that career development work will continue, for now at least, to operate in a world in which human capital theory is important, it will need to operate at a range of levels. For example, career development interventions may seek to help people to understand that their own life chances are likely to be improved by gaining recognised qualifications, but also support reflection about why this is and what social problem it solves. In addition, career development practitioners may wish to work with clients to influence policy and systems in ways that challenge the inequalities of power and opportunity that characterise the careers of those who have different types and levels of qualification. At the heart of such an endeavour is a fundamental question for human capital theory, which is whether it is fair and justifiable that access to the good life depends on an individual's ability to accumulate more human capital than those around them. In addressing these complex issues at multiple levels, career development practitioners will have to straddle what Watts (2015c) described as the 'progressive' rationale for career development education, that it can help individuals to maximise their position within the current political economy, and the 'radical' rationale, which views career development interventions as having a legitimate role in remaking the political economy, and in this context challenging the hegemony of human capital theory.

Human capital theory has been central to the theory and practice of career development. This chapter challenges the assumption of both the explanatory power of human capital theory and its desirability. There is a need to shine a spotlight on human capital theory and to recognise its ideological character. Most importantly, for careers professionals, there is a need to notice the way human capital theory has shaped our practice and to consider what alternatives might look like.

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