

## The Role and Relevance of Theory in Careers Professionalisation and Practice

Lydia Lauder, Careers and Employability Services, The Open University, Manchester, UK; and  
Siobhan Neary, International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS), University of Derby, Derby, UK

### Abstract

A new qualification benchmark, the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) Diploma Level 6 in Career Guidance and Development was established in the UK in 2011. This study was conducted to ascertain whether a theoretical nexus is necessary for practice and how this could contribute to the professionalisation of the adult careers sector in England. The study was undertaken with practitioners, all of whom had trained either through the work-based competency route or the academic route. Practitioners were asked to consider their theoretical modalities and how this influenced the embedding of theory within their professional practice. Analysis of survey and case study data revealed that degrees of exposure to theory during initial training affects capacities for theoretical integration during ongoing practice and development.

**Keywords:** careers, professionalisation, training, career theory

### Introduction: Conceptualising Theory for Careers Practice and Professionalisation

Theory holds a bipartite significance when understanding its relationship with practice and professionalisation. For careers practice, theory offers a source of guidance strategies and techniques to ensure that interactions with clients are purposeful and move towards identifiable outcomes. Two dominant strategies for theoretical improvisation have been distinguished: technical eclecticism and theoretical integration. Eclecticism involves the use of diverse methods and techniques drawn from different sources without necessarily subscribing to their parent theories (Kidd, 1996). Integration refers to attempts at synthesising diverse theoretical concepts into a coherent new theory (Hollanders, 1999). Within westernised training models in the field of careers, there is a prevailing preference for theoretical integration over non-theoretical eclecticism (Kidd, Killeen, Jarvis & Offer, 1997). This is because integrationism is seen to be more closely allied with the status of a profession as indicated by the acquisition of a theoretical body of knowledge (Williams, 1998).

Theory can therefore be considered as a macro-paradigm for informing and adapting practice. Alternatively, theory can be viewed as a reformative epitome where micro-theories are generated during integrative practice by the outcome of acts of the individual for social generativist causes and in the interests of professionalisation. The former may seem disempowering and the latter liberating to the individual practitioner, as it recognises the role of reflection in contributing to creation of theory and reducing the gap between formal theory and practice (Fook, 2015). Either way theory is evolving as practice is evolving (Reid, 2016). In this study, we attempt to discern between these two functionalities in the ongoing debate of theory and its relevance for careers practice and professionalisation

The relationship between theory and practice has been encapsulated within a number of significant ongoing debates, specifically prevalent within established westernised professional practice contexts. These debates are multifaceted and include the influence of

work-based and academic approaches during initial training (Bimrose & Bayne, 1995; Collin, 1998; Harrison, Edwards & Brown, 2001; Kidd et al, 1997) and traditional, positivist theories relating to the guidance process which are often favoured politically (Bimrose, 2006). Lent (2017) has presented the debate between theory, research and practice while Evetts (2011) has explored the dichotomies arising during ongoing professionalisation where organisational or policy forms of control may circumvent opportunities for an individual's personal fusion between skills and theory (Lauder, 2012).

The establishment of the all-age National Careers Service in England, in April 2012, embraced proposals within political discourses for re-professionalisation (Careers Profession Task Force, 2010). The service provides free careers advice and guidance to adults of 19 years or older via localised multichannel support and a National Contact Centre offering young people of 13 years and above telephone and web-based advice. Central to such rhetoric is the up-skilling of the careers workforce to achieve a minimum Level 6 in Career Guidance and Development (Career Profession Task Force, 2010) within the desiderata for practice. The professional development corollary to the new vista for minimum level training is the importance placed upon individual professionalisation where Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is seen to "maximise staff potential linking theory to practice, improving morale and motivation, helping self-reflection and providing opportunities for sharing effective practice" (Career Profession Task Force, 2010, p. 19).

In April 2012 the then Skills Funding Agency (SFA) in England made it a requirement for Prime Contractors delivering the National Careers Service to make arrangements for the training of 50% of the staff cohort towards attainment of the Level 6 Diploma. The lead author who worked for a Prime Contractor in the North of England translated this directive into non-accredited, formalised training activity for a sample of the workforce. A modular approach was adopted focusing on the mandatory units identified by the Career Professional Alliance for professional practice registration (Careers Development Institute, 2014).

In this paper, we present a research project in which we examined this approach to professionalisation of experienced staff through the critical lenses of the theory-practice binary as staff were trained for the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) Level 6 qualification (Level 6 is equivalent to the final year of a bachelor's degree). Our study focuses on a number of discourses on theoretical improvisation in adult careers practice under the prevailing zeitgeist of professionalisation. Our aim was to evaluate the impact of QCF Level 6 advice and guidance training, in particular theoretical Units 2 (reflect on and improve professional practice) and 3 (career guidance theory) in advancing the professionalisation of the workforce through the enhancement of theoretical knowledge and application in practice. In addition, to determine whether previous engagement with theory on initial training via National Vocational Qualification Level 4 (NVQ4) (work-based training), Qualification in Careers Guidance (QCG) or Diploma in Careers Guidance (Dip CG) (University-based training) affects advisers' current attitudes, assimilation and application of theory. That is, to explore practitioners' approaches to theoretical synthesis in practice, giving consideration to varying guidance and career theories, and to examine factors inhibiting / facilitating conceptual integration with practice.

The originality of the study is two-fold: firstly, to develop new knowledge regarding how theory is being used in contemporary adult career guidance practice and secondly to determine how new QCF Diploma Level 6 recipients conceptualise the value and use of theory to further build and enhance practice and a priori perceptions of professional identity. The quality of the training and its efficacy for the challenges inherent in the changing landscape of labour markets, and moreover professionalisation, are beyond the scope of this current paper but will be examined in future publications.

### **Evidence from the literature**

Williams (1998) noted that the possession of a systematised, theoretical body of knowledge is perceived as fundamental to professional status with many aspiring professions who are attempting to “define and emphasise the body of theoretical knowledge underpinning their work” (p. 72). Current political discourses have potentiated the quest for professionalisation of the careers sector in England (Careers Profession Taskforce, 2010), and for “revitalising the professional status of careers guidance” (Watts, 2011, p.2). A central approbation was the up-skilling of the careers workforce to achieve a minimum Level 6, one of the recommendations of the Careers Profession Task Force, with emphasis on theoretical content as a desideratum for practice.

The challenge, however, is the reconciliation of the theory-practice binary across a number of ongoing debates including: competency-based training juxtaposed against academic routes; renewed conceptualisations of ‘career’ and theoretical developments for the postmodern era and the dichotomies between professional autonomy and operational constraints as imposed upon by the shifting political emphases shaping the sector. Theory may be perceived as important but other knowledge may be more applicable. In an Australian survey, career development professionals identified career development theory as a core competency (Athanasou, 2012). However, it was perceived as less important than knowledge of the labour market and information and resource management.

Research evidence is indicative of a rich theoretical diversity and a strong intellectual base for careers guidance in the UK. Categorisation of career guidance theories is a sophisticated undertaking pursuant to the central premise that a career theory is one which “helps us understand the time dimension and dynamics of, and succession or change in, the working lives of individuals” (Killeen, 1996, p.33). Kidd (1996) has presented a four-fold taxonomy of theoretical orientations helpful for career counselling interviews. Kidd, Killeen, Jarvis and Offer (1994) focused on theoretical application in careers interviewing distinguishing between career theory (which attempts to describe and explain the process of career development) and guidance theory (which is concerned with how best to intervene in an individuals’ career development).

However, many theories are becoming increasingly irrelevant for the postmodern forms of career (Collin, 1998) in that what was connoted in the past as ‘bureaucratic’ is being replaced by the ‘professional’, ‘entrepreneurial’ and ‘boundaryless’ forms of the current zeitgeist. Newer trends in theoretical developments account for specific client groups, multicultural milieu and the multiple perspective discourse of modern times (Bimrose, 2009). Kidd (2007) has differentiated between the ‘constructionist’ and ‘constructivist’ paradigms operating

within these new perspectives. Narrative approaches (Reid, 2005, 2016), Careership (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), Action Theory and Planned Happenstance (Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz, 1999), Kaleidoscope career theory (Maniero & Sullivan, 2006) are some examples of theoretical advancements that have kept pace with changing times.

Evidence suggests that such extensive theoretical diversity creates disjuncture in practice as practitioners struggle to arbitrate between different theoretical approaches (Kidd et al., 1994; Watson, 1994). The investigation by Kidd and her colleagues also found that the dominant, traditional models for careers interviewing had changed in favour of those emphasising interpersonal and relationship skills. That is, theories principally influential upon interview practice were guidance models as opposed to career theories. The preponderance towards an 'eclectic blending of techniques' governed by the theories of guidance, led the authors to conclude that there was a lack of a deeper integration between theory and practice and that "training enables careers officers to be effective practitioners, not reflective professionals" (Kidd et al., 1994, p. 392) thus casting doubt on the view that careers guidance is an applied science.

A number of publications have attempted to provide a nomenclature of activities delineated by the two varying approaches: consensual distinctions (Norcross & Grencavage, 1989), interviewing schema (Kidd et al, 1997) and a classification scheme comprising seven guidance activities juxtaposed against the main career models informing practice (Kidd, 1996). The multiplicity of theoretical models available is problematic; Watson (2019) has queried the need for so many theories and our propensity to constantly revise and create new theories. Recent studies have shown that careers interviews are more systematic with practitioners affirming familiarity with a range of theories which inform their work. In Brown's (2002) survey, 55% of career counsellors frequently listed two or three influential theories, notably Differentialist (Holland, 1997), Developmentalist (Super, 1990), Social Learning / Cognitive (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2002) and unspecified developmental models. Kidd et al. (1997) were led to broadly characterise guidance interviewing as flexible and eclectic as evidenced by 80% of careers officers combining ideas and 68% adopting a coherent approach rather than using techniques in an unsystematic way. Work by Everitt, Neary, Delgado Fuentes and Clark (2018) has suggested that as practitioners become immersed in practice their recollection of theories from their training become echoes with only vague recollections of theories such as Planned Happenstance (Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz, 1999) or Trait and Factor (Holland, 1997). They are also unlikely to have access to opportunities to learn about new and emerging theories.

The integrationist movement may prove a strong custodian of the pervasive principles and purposes of careers guidance. Kidd (1996) outlined the historical chapters of career guidance and argued for a raised awareness of these different ideologies so that practitioners can be "helped to develop their own style, over and above a technical blend of methods through the process of theoretical integration....to think strategically about the aims and purposes in their interviewing" (p. 207). Integrationist principles call for discerning practitioners to utilise both research and experience to more effectively meet the needs of their clients and to "develop and employ an expanded toolbox" (Norcross & Grencavage, 1989, p.241). Flexibility in practice provides the conduits through which practitioners can test against alternatives and new ideas, the implicit theory they bring with them (Killeen, 1996). Integrationists thus

engage in the philosophical critique of theory moving beyond its functionalism and pursuing transformational theoretical development through “disparate excursions into new territory” (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989, p. 20). Therefore, this study has particular significance in formally reintroducing theory to experienced practitioners and supporting them in exploring their relationship with theory and practice.

### **Methodology Participants, triangulated methods, and research design**

This interpretative study focused on the varying perceptions of practitioners towards integrating theory within their professional practice development. A triad of complementary mixed methods, comprising a triangulated methodological framework, was adopted for this programme of research: archival research, a workforce development survey using quantitative questionnaires, and in-depth case studies. For the initial email survey, structured questionnaires examining training perceptions and their influences on theoretical abstraction in practice were adapted from previous informative surveys (namely, Brown, 2002; Hollanders & McLeod, 1999; Kidd et al., 1994; Kidd et al., 1997). Feedback on questionnaire items and the operationalisation of constructs was received through pilot responses and investigator triangulation. Following modifications, the subsequent workforce survey was issued through email to 35 research participants who had all undergone professional development training on the QCF Diploma Level 6 programme over the period of one year. These participants represented the full training cohort and were purposively selected. A triad of judicious reminders through collaborative approaches between managers and trainers yielded a response rate of 83%. The Office of Population Census and Surveys recommends the use of three reminders towards increasing the original return by 30% with a range of follow-up methodologies eliciting up to a 95.6% response rate (Bailey 1994). The email survey examined: training vistas and their influences on theoretical abstraction in practice; theoretical relevance and utility; practitioner experience and politicised services and theoretical modalities, interactions and reflections on practice.

Emergent themes from the workforce survey then enabled more in-depth analysis through 12 adviser case studies. Selection criteria for the 12 adviser case studies included variation in: initial qualifications background (academic or vocational, i.e. QCG, NVQ4 or Dip CG); length of professional service; performance level; degree of participation in the QCF CPD programme (full Diploma or modular units acquired); and delivery contexts (recruitment / employment-based context, telephone helpline, further education college environment and managerial responsibilities). Narratives were used to explore the influence of practitioners’ initial training, existing theoretical knowledge utilised in practice, and the impact of the ‘new’ theoretical knowledge learned through the QCF CPD programme and how this was contributing to individual professionalisation and interview practice. The narratives were thematically analysed. This supplemented the survey data and offered a richer interpretation of practitioner perspectives. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity of participants.

The phenomenological case study strategy used in our research provided “rules, generalisations and categories, refined as successive cases were considered and developed clarification of knowledge embedded in these cases through phenomenological analysis” (Scanlon & Baillie, 1994, p. 412). This interpretivist approach was selected to enable an

examination of the experience of the participating actors and to derive an understanding of these various experiences to inform improvements for future professional development activities. The adoption of reflexivity via case studies within this enquiry provided the ability “to ‘suspend’, ‘bracket’ or, in a sense, step outside of a priori assumptions about the phenomena being investigated” (Scanlon & Baillie, 1994, p.412).

Findings Initial Training Influences on Theoretical Familiarity and Relevance for Practice Findings indicated that theoretical relevance for practice is highly considered by adult career practitioners. Over three-quarters of questionnaire respondents esteemed theory for its utility for immediate practice, ongoing practice and as a contributor to professional identity. However, perceptions of relevance were often notional and not always informed by theoretical exposure during initial training or by the ability to synthesise theory with practice. Some case study participants with initial competency-based training backgrounds (NVQ 3 and 4 Advice and Guidance) considered themselves to have been “thrown in at the deep end and left to have a go at practice” because theoretical content had been negligible on the initial training programme. These advisers asserted that they had been little equipped to realise theoretical instrumentality in practice and consequently struggled to ‘map’, ‘name’ and ‘locate’ theory (using Harrison, Edwards & Brown’s [2001] words) in career guidance discourses.

“It’s important to have awareness and having a general background but not necessarily thinking of a theory and then applying it directly to somebody...not necessarily sticking hard and fast to theory...I can’t give you names of theories because I don’t get hung up on these – I just use the techniques....” (Jack)

For these case study participants therefore, NVQ training had led to a reliance on heuristic skills-based approaches and a limited engagement with theory to support practice and ongoing professional development.

At best, competency-based routes had supported eclectic techniques although these had perhaps been fostered more because of individual commitment to own advancement and satisfaction of intellectual curiosity. This was not uncommonly associated with advisers who had entered the sector from other related professions such as teaching and held graduate or postgraduate level qualifications wherein the skills for critical thinking and theoretical infrastructures for practice had been promoted. As one participant acknowledged:

“There were no taught sessions on the NVQ and we only covered two theories - Egan’s Skilled Helper Model and Ali and Graham: The Counselling Approach to Careers Guidance - so I had to do my own reading and asking people, my own research. It was more my degree studies and PCGE that helped me to engage with and understand the theoretical content”. (Alison)

#### Table 1

High levels of theoretical astuteness were also common amongst academically-trained practitioners, those who had undertaken the higher level QCG/Dip CG, delivered by Universities (see Table 1). Theories were viewed as “intelligent mirrors” for practice with respondents conceding familiarity with a wide range of models across theoretical

taxonomies. Traditional approaches were cited and more notably frameworks supporting reflective analysis and newer orientations for guidance practice in the postmodern era (such as Cognitive Behavioural Approaches and Persuasive Argument Theory). However theoretical education under QCG or Dip CG programmes had infrequently prepared advisers for the realities of practice. A theory-practice gap had emerged as respondents felt that theories had been taught that were outmoded for the current client landscapes, were too extensive or inflexible towards encompassing the complexities of practice. Lisa and Nina present their views below:

“But I also remember sort of thinking, I was not against, but I found differentialist theory quite old-fashioned and thought how much does it fit with practice? And I never really used it within my practice then.” (Lisa)

“There was lot of theory; at that point it was very theoretical, and we were just finding our feet. It felt like learning to drive – we were left on our own to try it for ourselves.” (Nina)

For Nina, the theory-practice disjuncture had only come to be redressed following her achievement of the NVQ 4 during the probationary year of training for the Dip CG:

“The NVQ was about starting to get that theory into practice in one: one delivery.” (Nina)

### **Practice Experience and Modifications in Theoretical Assimilation and Interview Style**

The data from the study suggests that process-oriented approaches such as Egan (1990), Hambly (2007) and Bedford’s First Model (1982), were found more attractive and contributed to a blending of techniques. Career theories of practical tractability were also preferred within technical applications such as the Skills Health Check tool (LSC, 2009) based on a Differentialist approach (Holland, 1997) or questioning strategies such as Motivational Interviewing, (Miller & Rollnick, 1991).

#### Table 2

Over two-thirds of survey respondents indicated that theoretical relevance had grown analogous to their development as practitioners (see Table 2) as noted in Leo’s comment below:

“The relevance of theory has increased as my experience has increased and there is more scope for engaging with theory as you become more confident in your skills. It’s about autonomy and confidence in the role and gaining more ‘space’ to embed and apply theory with experience.” (Leo)

Often advisers had been afforded few opportunities to update their theoretical knowledge and combined with theoretically impoverished initial training, the obdurate linkage of specific theories to practice had proved enigmatic. This was acknowledged by 11 questionnaire

respondents whose interview style had not changed and they did not use specific theory in practice (see Table 2). Experience had also not altered rudimentary interview practice for the majority (19) of advisers trained under academic theory-led curricula, who continued to give allegiance to the interview models they had been fundamentally introduced to. Abstraction within practice however remained ambiguous irrespective of initial training although inversely correlated to academic knowledge. The need to 'cling to' theory in the absence of experience was viewed pejoratively by advisers with the development of more tacit knowledge gained through reflective practice. The move away from academic reliance to heuristic confidence conjoined with theoretical justification in practice was affirmed by many participants.

Therefore, initial training influences subsequently moderated through experience and practice realities had produced some polarisation in theoretical modalities. Twelve respondents ascertained that their approach was best described as 'theoretical' and 6 advisers as 'atheoretical'. A new position also emerged amongst a considerable number (9) of practitioners: the 'quasi-theoretical'. Herein practice is deemed to be located within an intermediary paradigm in the praxis towards purer forms of theoretical integration. These respondents described their practice in evolutionary terms having become more conscious of theory, its relevance and applicability following the QCF Diploma Level 6 training.

### **Impacts of Contemporary Training and Transmuting Models of Practice**

The majority of advisers (24 respondents) reported immediate beneficial impacts from their training. Participants had found a 'capacity to name' theories and 'map' their practice against theoretical frameworks and that these concepts of naming and mapping as defined by Harrison, Edwards & Brown, (2001) had enabled them to articulate their tacit use of theory in practice and developing critical awareness. This in turn had engendered a renewed confidence in their practice and identity as careers professionals. Priya shares her experience as follows.

"I am more confident as a practitioner. Particularly motivational and decisionmaking theory has had a huge impact on my interview style.....definitely the theory and training have strengthened my professional identity". (Priya)

The shift from pragmatic to more critical approaches in practice had been catalysed through the training although egression had been facilitated to a greater extent amongst those with academic than competency-based backgrounds and / or those with prior substantial training in career theory. The sample of advisers revealed a fairly even spread across all the metatheoretical classifications. There was unequivocal preponderance for guidance models (e.g. Egan, 1990; Hambly, 2007) which provide clear processes for interviewing within goal directed orientations that are consummate with current service policies (such as producing action plans).

It appears that practice is now predisposed towards the improvisation of models for postmodern contexts (see Table 3). Practitioners related theories pertinent to the contexts

and client groups they were worked with. Therefore, the use of motivational approaches when working with clients who were long-term unemployment or had been made redundant (18 advisers) was considered highly relevant. Flexible orientations to career planning and management, such as Planned Happenstance and Career Helping Theories were viewed by 13 respondents as useful. Those supporting clients from varying ethnic minority backgrounds and working in changing economic landscapes and multicultural contexts valued Community Interaction Theory for Career Choice Theories (14 respondents). Relevance was impugned by a small minority (2 advisers) to theories explaining 'career', which were perceived to be outdated and newly introduced decision-making approaches generated concerns about practical utility and remained to be 'tested out' in practice.

When considering the theoretical modalities that practitioners espoused, advisers affirmed that theories influenced overarching guidance objectives and they employed what Kidd et al. (1997) have called "skilled judgements about the appropriateness of particular techniques for different clients" (p.64). They were able to combine approaches from radically opposing models (although caution is exercised here in differentiating between advisers' espoused theories and those actually used in practice). For example, one adviser described her skill in being able to manipulate a differentialist matching tool, the Skills Health Check (LSC, 2009) to affect customers' motivations and encourage confidence in conjunction with identifying matches of occupational suitability. Others expressed conflation between use of the Skills Health Check (LSC, 2009) (Differentialism) and subsequent arbitration through developmentalist (Developmentalism, Super, 1990) considerations and opportunistic realities (Opportunity Structure Theory, Roberts, 1977).

Reflection was often in retrospect of the interview and limited to advisers' 'espoused theories' than their 'tacit theories in use' (Scanlon & Baillie, 1994) or focused on pragmatic reflections concerning operational exigencies than critical ones thus restraining unique theoretical integrative practice. As Nilam conceded:

"I guess the (QCF) training has helped me to better integrate theory within my practice. I don't feel that I consciously do it with the client, due to the wider range of pressures but on reflection I am able to relate back to theory." (Nilam)

Thus, while many a priori features of an integrationist modality were expressed by participants within this study, the evidence for more tacit, explicit relationships between theories and interview style as espoused by Kidd (1996) is indeterminate and practice can only therefore be ascribed as 'quasi-theoretical', undergoing transmutation between eclecticism and integration.

### **Discussion Initial Training: theoretical antecedents and paradigms for practice and professional development**

Evidence from this study indicates that initial training under vocational systems may provide what Bathmaker (2013) has called only a tenuous introduction to theory. This research suggests that the casual effects of impoverished exposure to theory on NVQ programmes are manifold and includes considerable difficulties in theoretical engagement and assimilation during further professionalisation against the new QCF standard. Practice is also circumscribed by theoretical deficiency such that competency-trained advisers tend to

accent delivery 'less by the determinate application of theory' (Killeen & Kidd, 1995, p.407), relying more on their 'axiomatic assumptions' (Kidd et al., 1994, p.402) and the application of 'pick and mix approaches' such that interviewing becomes a 'simple cluster of techniques' (Kidd, 1996, p.206). The capacity for theoretical involution during professional development and practice is however modified by experiences of academic study (whether sector specific qualifications such as the Dip CG or QCG or graduate degrees in wider disciplines) as well as workplace cultures which advocate good career guidance and nurture professionalism. Considerations for redefining the qualification requirements of careers practitioners therefore gain merit, resonating with European training vistas where guidance workers hold first degrees in related disciplines (such as psychology) combined with years of specialist or postgraduate training in guidance (as in France, Portugal, Spain and Slovenia) leading to an "interdisciplinary enrichment" in the services ultimately provided (McCarthy, 2004, p.165).

Experience as a modifying influence on practice and evolving theoretical modalities Advisers' theoretical perspicacity was also found to be a corollary of their experience in practice. Collin (1998, p. 82) suggested that it takes 'several years of experience for the interplay of theory with practice and the fusion and skills and theory'. The development of a 'sense of what is important for clients' and being able to 'readily describe and explain what is involved in what you are doing and why' emerges from the analysed experiences of a 'competent practitioner', a stage of maturation over a 7-to-8-year continuum within a model of professional development considered by Furbish and Ker (2002, p.8). Theory was thus valued for its relevance by experienced advisers who could better contextualise its utility through drawing upon past experiences in the adoption of quasi-theoretical approaches to practice. Theoretical relevance for particular client contexts was pervasive in exerting modifications in interview style and had led to a more coherent amalgamation of techniques including some degree of synthesis between radically opposing models of career. Primarily influential, however, were theories conveying practical efficacies allowing for a technical blending of methods within an eclectic but increasingly integrationist modality of practice. Careers practice lies within a transient state having proceeded from the initial segregation of skills and theory to desegregation in eclecticism (where methods and techniques from different models are intermingled without necessarily subscribing to their parent theories, Kidd, 1996) and is now gradually progressing towards integration in the synthesis of conceptually diverse frameworks

### **Professional Development Training and integrationist practice**

The egression towards integrationist practice has been precipitated by the professionalisation training programme. Practitioners now avail themselves of wider theoretical desiderata including career helping and motivational theories appropriate to the uncertainties of modern economic and career landscapes. Objective guidance techniques provided by traditional career theory are increasingly being combined with subjective techniques derived from counselling theory in practice (Savickas, 1993) to support clients in meaning-making and to self-manage their careers. It is the ability to place the client's need above the practitioner's own theoretical, subjective preferences and employ an expanded toolbox as discriminating craft workers (Norcross & Grencavage, 1989) that intimates movement towards theoretical integrationism.

Integrationism however demands more from the marriage of theory and practice calling for the new epistemology of reflective practice where theories are constructed through their use and technical rationality is displaced by personal models of artistic practice. Formal theories are validated through personal experience and reinterpreted within personal models serving as heuristic devices (Collin, 1998) for the confident, expert practitioner. Whilst the training had enabled advisers to conceptualise their practice, reflexion was mostly in retrospect and focused on their 'espoused theories' as opposed to 'theories in use'. It is worth noting the theories included in the training are proscribed by the professional association, the Career Development Institute (CDI), within the National Occupational Standards, UK. As such the standards are not always going to be inclusive of emerging theories which can inform theoretical knowledge of practice. This research presents an original study which explores how practitioners are relating their eclectic theoretical knowledge to the varied and multiple needs of their client group. As such, ongoing and continued theoretical professional development is essential in ensuring practitioners have the knowledge to meet the evolving needs of their clients.

Confidence in theoretically informed tacit knowledge was nascent following the training programme and competency could not yet be ascribed across a variety of theoretical systems. Since the systemic integration predicates an "ability to be taught, replicated and evaluated" (Norcross & Grencavage, 1989, p.240) by self-monitoring individuals, there is still much ground to be gained before careers practice can make the claim for theoretical integrationism. Practitioners must therefore consciously adopt the practice of 'reflection-in-action' engaging in their own research and theorising (Collin, 1998) to keep pace with the changing contexts of the modern zeitgeist.

## Conclusion

The implications for ongoing training are significant for the maturation of integrationist practice. The initial success of the programme described in this study can be attributed in no small degree to the submersion of theoretical learning within the tenets of learning how to reflect (Moore and Neary, 2014). Most of the advisers were already skilled in the practice of interviewing and could therefore concentrate on theoretical conceptualisation and practical extrication presented in the training, having long relinquished the concerns of primordial practice. Findings from this research corroborate previous work that "the training of guidance workers significantly influences, inter alia their professional behaviour and the development of a profession" (McCarthy, 2004, p160).

In a field that is rich in theoretical diversity and modalities for theoretical improvisation in practice, it is not easy for practitioners to be fully conversant with the wide plethora of perspectives that can inform practice. This research project supports Norcross and Grencavage (1989) who asserted that the antonymous strategies of technical eclecticism and theoretical integrationism are not disparate activities, technical eclectics cannot ignore theory, and neither can integrationists ignore technique. However, supporting and encouraging practitioners to engage fully with theory both in initial training but equally importantly on an ongoing basis is a challenge (Neary & Johnson, 2016). This has to be acknowledged and strategies need to be considered as to how this can be more systemically

enacted. The implications for professionalism, without an articulated and applicable body of theoretical knowledge which is both explicit and integrated within practice, presents a reductionist view of career guidance. Therefore, in the road to sophisticated integration, we may continue to expect, as did Norcross and Grencavage (1989), an “arduous journey”, one in which “steady progress and the long view are to be encouraged” (p. 23).

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