

THE GOLDEN RULE FOR CAREER CHOICES: A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH TO APPLIED CAREER COUNSELLING

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Abstract

Career counselling will be analysed in an interdisciplinary and holistic manner focussing on the common denominators between the psychology of work and labour economics. In an attempt to develop valid guidelines for applied career counselling, we will concentrate upon basic critical factors that influence career choices, such as: personality interests, abilities and will, labour market, family and financial data, random events. All the above factors interact with each other under the umbrella of the so-called “golden rule for career choices”, an original approach introduced in this paper. Basic assumption of this notion is that persons with great abilities and strong will have their choice of a wider range of professions that match with their personality type, including professions not comprising other positive factors. Conversely, people with subpar abilities and a weak will would be advised to choose professions that firstly match their personality and secondly, include positive factors mentioned above.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary, golden rule, applied career guidance

Introduction

Throughout the relatively short history of career counselling as a separate scientific field, many theoretical concepts have unfolded. All of them have had the same goal, to explain human behaviour as it relates to career orientation and to assist individuals with moulding their life in the most optimal way. Nevertheless, career theory has been criticised for its tendency to be formed within a complex context and by the accretion of discrete segments (Patton & McMahon, 1999). Super (1992) acknowledged that his theoretical formulation was segmental and represented an effort to bring together concepts from various branches of psychology. Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996) commented that “theory in career psychology has increasingly moved toward a collection of miniature theories, each dealing with circumscribed, explicit segments of vocational behaviour, to be woven into a broad theory after the smaller theories have been shaped by empirical findings” (p.338). Each theory or model offers explanations about differing parts of the process of career development. As Super (1992) has stated, it is not valid to ask which group of theories is the best one, since neither is “sufficient without the other” (p.59).

The Need for an Interdisciplinary, Holistic Contemporary Approach

The need for an interdisciplinary and holistic approach has been emphasised by many scholars. Patton and McMahon (1999) mentioned that the adoption of an integrative framework could provide coherence to the field, by providing a comprehensive conceptualisation of the many existing theories and concepts relevant to understanding career development. The proponents of the recent movement toward convergence have emphasised

the importance of viewing career behaviour and the relationship between all relevant parts to each other and to the whole. This approach requires considering contributions from all theories when exploring an individual's career decision making processes (Patton, McMahon, 1999). However, while the complexity and controversies of various theories reflects the complexity of career behaviour, all writers do not support the need for a corresponding complex grand theory, or group of theories. Vondracek et al. (1986) commented that "the ultimate result of embracing an interdisciplinary, systems theory type view of career development will be a shift from simplicity to complexity" (p.6), with related research and measurement concerns. Nevertheless, it is clear that, we are experiencing the emergence of a paradigm shift from theories based on logical positivism (e.g. trait-factor), to postmodern perspectives emphasising counsellor-client collaboration. It is also clear that, although no single theory is superior to the others, the field is stronger because of the multiple perspectives currently espoused (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009). As a general trend, career development theories have been moving toward holistic approaches. Savickas et al (2010) mentioned that, "21st century theories should approach careers as individual scripts" (p.129). Beilin (1955) pointed out the tendency for human behaviour to move from general, dependent, self-oriented, and isolated to specific, independent, social, and integrated. Career development has been construed by many writers as one aspect of this maturing process. However, constructivism itself faces the challenge of being more developed theoretically and philosophically (Reid, 2006). The division between theory and practice has been the topic of considerable debate. Although there has been extensive research on career development, the communication between practitioners and researchers is still insufficient. Savickas (2003) argues that "extensive data pertaining to career development continues to accumulate yet not be used, because career counsellors and vocational psychologists work in separate spheres. Career development researchers have already produced an impressive amount of content. And now may be the time to focus on helping career counsellors use that content in their practices" (p.89). However, according to Van Esbroeck (2007), vocational psychologists and practitioners do not need to choose between post-modern, constructivist approaches on the one hand, and empirical, positivist approaches on the other. They also do not need to choose between theory and practice, qualitative versus quantitative research or a focus on the individual versus the environment. Theory and practice may enrich each other in order to develop valid systems of applied career counselling. Another significant issue that should be taken into account is the impact of the recent global trends on career counselling services during a period of worldwide recession. Szilagy (2010) draws our attention to a strange change in the expressed needs of people. In the past people tried to satisfy the highest level of their needs through their career, according to Maslow's pyramid (e.g. self-actualisation), these days we are witnessing a change of focus: back to the basics. Unprecedented unemployment figures indicate that physiological and safety requirements have become more important than self-development. As a result, career guidance is becoming more important for the weaker and less privileged people than ever. In term of interventions, we notice a move from narrative approaches to trait and factor ones, which understandable within the context described above. Multiple theoretical perspectives indicate the vitality that exists within the career development field. Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey (2009) encourage counsellors not only to become familiar with the theoretical framework but to also engage in the task of constructing their own career development theory. This should be based, we might argue, upon established theories that provide a fruitful ground for valid career guidance guidelines. Undoubtedly, counsellors are obliged to try to create the "bridge" of implementing research results into real life fields. Therefore, the present requirements for careers guidance and counselling practitioners include: incorporating career development theories, becoming familiar with all available methods and new technologies, becoming "knowledge workers"

(Bimrose & Brown, 2010) and acquiring knowledge from different scientific fields. It also may be alleged that the applied aspects of career guidance concern the wider public, and if possible, must avoid contradictory or indistinct opinions and assumptions. The basic need is to provide specific, clear and comprehensive positions and directions regarding the selection of studies, profession and careers. The scientific differentiations or even recriminations regarding issues of this institution can and should only interest the academics and researchers of the field. Similar practices, when applied in the same area, can barely contribute to one's need for clarity and positive results. They create confusion and disorientate instead of orientating counsellors and the wider public to make the right choices when selecting studies and professions. Career guidance can dramatically mark one's life path and influence the development of economy and society in a country as a whole. Career counselling is an instrument of public policy and a socio-political tool, one that should incite the specialists of the field to be involved more actively in legislative and policy projects. Herr (2003) contends that, the demand for career assistance will expand due to rising unemployment rates and an increase in part-time work. Savickas (2003) states that counsellors need to help individuals adapt to dramatic changes in the economy and occupational structure. This is a fact not yet widely comprehended, even today. The need for a clear and specific hypothesis for such an important institution influencing the movements of society as a whole, and including mainly the young (the hope and future of the world) can and should be taken into consideration very seriously.

Considering the above-mentioned issues, our efforts are orientated towards applied methods that incorporate research results from several theoretical approaches, sometimes controversial in concept but from our point of view complementary in essence. The elaboration of the five critical factors in relation to the so-called "golden rule" incorporate elements from trait and factor theories. However, it places the individual into a wider context which unceasingly interacts and acts reciprocally with the individual and from such a perspective adopts the principles of constructivism (Guichard, 2005; Savickas, 2010).

The Five Critical Factors for Career Choices

The holistic approach to career counselling is derived from an interdisciplinary point of view, the combination of different scientific fields, mainly the psychology and the economics of labour. Elements from the fields of pedagogies, the sociology of occupations, human resource management, psychometrics, statistics and computer science, may also be used. In this modern view, we introduce "the golden rule for the proper career choices" and the basic critical factors for such a selection process, which are the following:

- Occupational personality interests and inclinations
- Abilities and will
- Labour market and occupational perspectives
- Family and financial data
- Random events

These five critical factors for career choices, combined with the golden rule to be further analysed here, may be related, to a certain extent, to the dynamic model of career choice development (Van Esbroeck, Tibos, & Zaman, 2005). Career decision requires a series of recurrent mini-cycles going through sensitisation, exploration of the self, environmental exploration, the relationship between the self and the environment, specification and decision-making. Increasing knowledge of the world of work, occupations, and the self would facilitate the process of career decision and transitions by helping people to analyse their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. (Rossier, Berthoud & Dauwalder, 2003).

Personality Professional Inclinations

A plethora of studies have indicated that the role of personality traits, interests, inclinations and talents is the most decisive and critical variable for career development. Furthermore, the primary consideration when selecting studies, occupations and a career is self-knowledge, for one to know who they are and what they want or can do. (When asked what was most important in life for a man or a woman, Thales of Miletus, one of the seven ancient Greek philosophers, answered, “self-knowledge”). They must learn about their interests, inclinations, preferences and talents. They must know who they really are and not who they believe they are. Numerous studies have proven that when people manage to match their traits and interests with certain jobs, job satisfaction is increased (Holland, 1997, Wong & Wong, 2002). Moreover, when a harmonic “marriage” of personalities and jobs is realised, labour productivity is maximised.

Abilities and Will

Professional inclinations and interests may guide a person to choose a career path, but it is mainly his ability and will power that will influence the hierarchical level he may reach in his career. When a student does very well at school, as a result of abilities and will, it is logical that he will choose to enter a university with high admission requirements such as medical or law schools. This presupposes that the student wants to follow the particular career path and is well prepared for all the difficulties that he/she will encounter in such demanding career. It is usually considered waste of human resources when a student with great abilities and marks ends up choosing studies with low admission requirements. In relation to that, the structure of the existing educational system, its substructure, the prevailing educational directions, the study level, the examination systems, the selection procedure for other and/or higher studies, the influence of teachers in combination to the student performances, play a complementary role to the selection of studies, profession and careers (Roberts, 1981). The performance of a pupil in some lessons and generally at school is a first sign of the kind and particularly the level of studies and professional hierarchy they should be aiming for. Nevertheless, school performances do not constitute the absolute and unique criterion for persons’ ability and future professional success. Many great scientists were not very good students at school. With a strong will, persistence and life goals for professional and social evolution, hidden abilities might be radically enhanced. Self-efficacy and outcome expectations for a particular career activity are the major determinants of respective career interest (Lent et al., 1995). Therefore, the power of will remains as a very important factor in career choices, because “when you want something very much, the whole universe conspires in helping you to achieve it”. On the whole, abilities, performances, aptitudes, ambition and specifically will, consist critical factors for career choices. When combined with occupational inclinations, interests and talents, they constitute the core of a certain personality construction that matches with certain professions. In our view, other personality features such as emotional intelligence and balance, diligence, perception, creativity, critical thought, logic, stamina, extroversion and introversion, ambitions, life values etc. are of secondary importance, although they should not be ignored. Narrative approaches to career counselling assist clients to formulate their identity in their own jobs and to better understand their own life-themes, vocational personality, and adaptability resources (Savickas, 2005).

Labour Market and Occupational Perspectives

It generally accepted that “labour market information is a crucial feature of careers guidance and counselling” (Bimrose et al., 2006). Used skilfully, it has the potential to enhance the career guidance and counselling process in a multitude of ways. It consists of information on general employment trends, data on the structure of labour market,

information about the way the labour market functions and data focussing on equality and diversity (Bimrose, Brown, 2010). The knowledge of the professions of the future and of the past, which professions have positive perspectives and which appear to be degraded and begin to die out on the local, national and international market are of particular importance (Katsanevas, Livanos, 2011). In general, labour market and occupational perspectives constitute a particularly important criterion for career choices. This is strengthened by present employment uncertainty and rapid post-evolution in technology, economy, employment and the content of professions. It is logical for the majority of persons to choose from a variety of professions that suit them, those with better future prospects, and to avoid those that are considered to be degraded and tend to die out in the labour market. There is simply a much higher possibility for job vacancies in the field of the professions of the future than in the professions of the past. The majority of young people nowadays choose their studies, professions and career based on their future prospects and particularly on the security of guaranteed employment. The anxiety of finding a job in the present bleak labour market is stronger than anything that can be said against this point of view. Nevertheless, regardless of how strong this criterion is, it should not be the only one. It is necessary to quantify it with the other criteria and particularly with occupational personality matching. In this great life decision, if some professions do not suit one's personality type, his/her preferences and inclinations, these should not be selected regardless of how good their prospects are in the labour market or how positive other factors such as family and financial situation are. Working conditions and salaries, the kind of work, its content, the status of each profession, job security as well as hierarchical and career evolution perspectives, are other complementary elements that also need to be explored in the selection process. These particular parameters may be evaluated differently in accordance with working values, personality and interests. They constitute part of gaining enough knowledge of the "world of work" that is required when making the important great decision concerning one's professional future.

Family and Financial data

Depending on the situation, family environment, family tradition, culture and financial data, are also important critical factors for career choices. Blustein (1994) referred to two levels of context: the immediate familial and interpersonal context and the broader societal context represented by such factors as culture, socio-economic background, and other environmental influences. Jobs of the parents or a family business often offer an interesting perspective for young people when considering their professional development. Even though it may be denounced as favouritism, it is a fact that in our extremely competitive world, it would be wrong for one to ignore the advantages offered by family tradition, without permitting this to lead to complacency. Familial influences on career development have been well recognised (e.g., Bradley & Mims, 1992; Johnson, Buboltz, & Nichols, 1999; Hargrove, Inman, & Crane, 2005; Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou et al., 2003). Hannah and Kahn (1989) found that students from higher social classes had higher aspirations than students from lower social classes. The focus is usually on the involvement of parents during the decision making process of career selection while recent research attempts to connect the effect of career interest of the parents on the career interests of young people (Wong, C.S, Wong, P.M., Peng, K.Z., 2011). In south Mediterranean countries in particular, some parents try to impose their desires and inhibitions on their children as regards their studies and professions. Some young people are forced to study a science that is considered to advance social and financial development, such as medicine, engineering, and law or a family business. Nowadays though, such pressure might bring about completely opposite results from those expected. Young people challenge the older generations and particularly parents who are overprotective

and sometimes oppressive. Parents may be right when they insist on the selection of a particular career for their children in certain cases, but will fail due to their persistent and paternalistic behaviour. Furthermore, although it is unpleasant, we should be realistic on how much money each family can afford for the studies of their children. Country of residence or career is also relevant. One should first investigate the proximity of universities and if the local market offers career opportunities. The place where a university or college is based plays a very important role in educational choices, particularly for low-income families. Of course, young boys or girls can choose to study far from their hometown as long as this choice is supported by their personality type, family culture and financial capabilities. Generally, if such choices are feasible financially, they should not be excluded. The perspective of returning home can and should be encouraged. For this reason, when making career decisions, it is necessary to quantify the development of the local market in relation to the national and international one.

Random Events

Random events, unexpected fortunate or unfortunate coincidences and chances one encounters in life can play important role in career and personal development. Individual behaviour has to adapt to rapid changes occurring within the workplace environment, and career planning must become increasingly flexible and adaptable. Super (1992) commented, “We are evidently entering an age of emerging rather than pre-set goals”. Such frequent change, as well as the occurrence of chance events, or happenstance, may produce discontinuous change within an individual system (Patton, McMahon, 1999). Krumboltz and his associates (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999) recognize that career counselling often involves helping clients understand and take advantage of the chance events they encounter in daily living. They note that developing a sense of curiosity, being persistent, being flexible, maintaining a sense of optimism, and being willing to take risks are a skillset that increases one’s ability to take advantage of unplanned events. It is important that one be able to see when “opportunity is knocking” so as to make the right choices and be able to “ride the crest of the waves”. Other people should not be harmed, however. Random events, although of critical value for career choices, cannot be combined “a priori” with other factors within the context of the golden rule due to their unexpected nature. Good luck is welcomed in one’s life, but this does not mean that the effort for constant self-development and for enhancing knowledge and skills, required by the competitive world of current employment reality should be ignored. It is accepted that, all “*goods are obtained with effort*” and that professional and life success is, above all, the reward for everyone’s efforts. This should not be negated by the fact that mass media, presenting a false and virtual reality, tends to present success as easy and effortless. The never-ending conquest for knowledge is a source for life and joy, the power of worthiness, success and creativity.

The Golden Rule for Career Choices

The “golden rule for career choices” and the contemporary interdisciplinary and holistic approach introduced here, are a product of a perennial study of career guidance and counselling research and practice, in combination with the development and application of modern automatic career guidance tests (Author, 2008). The theory of the “golden rule” combines the aforementioned evaluations and leads to the following basic assertion: “*people with great abilities and strong will can choose from a wider range of professions that match with their personality type, including professions not comprising other positive factors mentioned above, excluding random events which cannot be calculated. Conversely, people with subpar abilities and weak will would be advised to choose professions that firstly match their personality and secondly, include positive factors mentioned above, excluding random*”

events". The greater the abilities, aptitudes, performances and level of will, the greater the "risk" of selecting professions represented by a negative mixture of the so-mentioned critical factors may be. For example, when one is greatly talented in theatre and has strong chooses to become an actor, in the end they will probably succeed and have a satisfying career, even though the specific profession is a very competitive one and has few opportunities for success. If one is sure about their choices and knows what they want and what they can do, they may be able to succeed. In contrast, persons with subpar abilities and not a particularly strong will, whose parents, or even themselves, insist they become a doctor (which is also a very difficult and competitive profession), will most likely end up in professional and personal dead end. It is better if these persons choose professions that match their personality type and have good occupational prospects in the labour market or comprise above positive factors discussed above. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, they should avoid professions that do not match their personality even if they have good prospects in the labour market, or include a positive combination of all critical factors. According to the social-cognitive perspective proposed by Lent, Brown, & Hackett (1995, 1996), all things being equal, people with the highest level of ability and the strongest self-efficacy beliefs will perform at the highest level. However, self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations continuously evolve as individuals interact with their environment. In the notion of the golden rule, (which we try to interrelate with theories and practice of our field), it should be also added that, nowadays in the globalised and fast moving world, certain persons might be forced to change more than one profession in their career. Given the on-going nature of change, there is a growing recognition that career choice and decision-making is a life long process. The idea of a lifetime job or even a lifetime profession is something that is changing (Amundson, 2006). Krivas (2011) states that the traditional perspective of career is a "normal" ascending route in the occupational hierarchy of one's career is now seriously in doubt. Moreover, there is such a great range of professions that people can choose from that it is not necessary to just think one way or insist on selecting only one profession. In reality, everyone can be matched with more than one profession. If for any reason a person is not able to follow their first choice then they should not give up but move on to their second choice. There is always the possibility that another professional passion can be found if the first choice is unattainable. For example, if we assume that there are 1,000 professions belonging to 17 large occupational groups, then a line must be drawn after the sixth or even the eighth category, excluding everything below it. This has been proven in practice by its application in Greece and Cyprus, since 2005, of more than 20,000 of our own computerised career guidance tests, the Career Gate Test, which is mainly based upon Holland personality type theory and other theoretical assumptions. (The C.G.T. is distributed by the Ministry of Education of Cyprus at all secondary state schools on the island, while the same test is massively distributed via many schools, career canters, local authorities, enterprises, etc. All relative information and a free sample of the test in English, is offered at www.careergatetest.com. What people should avoid (and this is a key point of the golden rule), is choosing professions and careers which are in complete contrast with their personality and interests. All persons should have an open occupational horizon and choose from a catalogue of professions that match their personality. They may eventually end up in professions rating first, second, third, fourth etc, in their list, depending on how compatible they may be with their personality and in relation to a positive mixture of the other positive criteria and factors (Author, 2008). As stated by Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry (2006), future methods of career counselling should take a dynamic approach that encourages imaginative thinking and the exploration of their possible selves. To maximise a client's career choice options, counsellors must encourage their clients to explore new activities, develop new interests, and consider new options based on newly formed interests and capabilities

(Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1996). Self-concept may be differentiated by new experiences and even by observing the behaviour of others. Therefore, self-knowledge is a life-long process as people's interests are constantly evolving and the self is continuously reconstituted (Savickas et al., 2010).

Conclusion

The above assumptions and in particular, the so-called notion of the golden rule, have been developed after intensive research and practice in career counselling and based on the implementation of large numbers of our computerised career guidance tests over the last six years. They represent a specific know-how in applied career guidance that can be used successfully, we believe, in practice. The methodology of the golden rule in relation to the computerised test has been extensively used by scholars and many scientists in Greece and Cyprus in everyday career counselling practices throughout the past few years. Occupational personality matching, abilities and will, the labour market and occupational perspectives, family and financial data and random events under the umbrella of the golden rule, have been and continue to be studied by our research team. These factors, the main critical parameters influencing career choices under the umbrella of the golden rule, are significant in the continuing effort to establish an applied system of valid guidelines for modern career counselling. We are also preparing a mathematical model and will be presenting it in the near future.

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