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Empirical Developments in Career Construction Theory

Editorial

Journal of Vocational Behavior

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Abstract

Career construction theory is a grand theory of career development. The goal of this special issue on empirical developments in career construction theory was to showcase research that addresses major unanswered questions regarding this theory, including the role of context and development over time, as well as the applicability of the theory in specific samples. Furthermore, we sought advanced research that addresses the dimensionality, processes, and outcomes of career construction by adopting diverse approaches, including quantitative, qualitative, and intervention methods. In this editorial, we briefly describe key propositions of career construction theory and emphasize major questions that remain to be answered within this theoretical framework. We then briefly summarize the eight empirical studies included in the special issue and explain how they, individually and collectively, contribute to the advancement of research on career construction.

Keywords: career construction theory, career development, special issue, editorial

Empirical Developments in Career Construction Theory

Careers are changing -- heterogeneous career patterns have resulted from changes in the nature of work, organizational structures, psychological contracts, workforce demographics, as well as broader economic factors (Baruch & Rousseau, 2018; Biemann, Zacher, & Feldman, 2012). Recent theoretical advances have suggested that in this changing career environment, people need to construct their own meaning of working (e.g., Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016). Moreover, proactivity and adaptability are now considered important individual characteristics for navigating increasingly complex and challenging career paths (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010). In this context, career construction theory has served as a useful meta-theoretical perspective for explaining dynamics in vocational behavior across the lifespan (Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009).

Empirical findings based on propositions of career construction theory are important, because they constitute a basis for career development practice, and provide professional career counselors with knowledge about how to help their clients make vocational choices and construct successful and satisfying work lives (e.g., professional athletes; Taylor, Siegele, Smith, & Hardin, 2018; academics; Zacher, Rudolph, Todorovic, & Ammann, 2018). However, recent studies grounded in career construction theory have primarily focused on the measurement and correlates of career adaptability (Savickas, 1997; see Rudolph, Lavigne, & Zacher, 2017, for a meta-analysis), and have not sufficiently addressed other key components and propositions of this theory. Thus, on the one hand, career construction theory provides a rich accounting of the process of proactive and adaptive career development over time; on the other hand, research has yet to completely unpack the nuances that this richness affords. This is an unfortunate observation, indeed. Motivated by this, we organized this *Journal of Vocational Behavior* special

issue on empirical developments in career construction theory to begin exploring some of the remaining questions that have evolved along with the development of this theory.

In this editorial, we briefly introduce readers to career construction theory and discuss its importance to the field of vocational psychology, broadly defined. We also emphasize several questions that remain to be answered within this theoretical framework, and then describe eight new empirical studies that represent significant advancements in our understanding of career construction theory. These eight papers anchor our special issue, and represent a remarkable contribution toward the continued development of this important theoretical perspective. Although we have made progress with advancing research based on career construction theory, we conclude our work here with a challenge to future researchers to continue to address important issues in career construction theory with enhanced rigor, and a critical eye towards the continued (re)development and refinement of this perspective.

Theoretical Background and Research Questions

Career construction theory is a grand theory of career development. The theory adopts a developmental, differential, and dynamic perspective on vocational behavior (Savickas, 2013). Embracing a lifespan developmental perspective, the theory aims to explain how people assimilate their vocational self-concepts with their work roles across their careers (Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005). Viewed through the lens of career construction, successful career development is seen as a continuous process of *adaptation* that results from the successful integration of personal needs with social expectations (e.g., norms for the preparation for, entrance into, participation within, or exit from various work roles; see Hirschi, Herrmann, & Keller, 2015; Savickas, 2002, 2005; Savickas et al., 2009). Specifically, career construction theory examines how people self-manage work-related demands, transitions, and traumas

(Savickas, 2013). Within career construction theory, the model of adaptation suggests that people exert control over their careers by adaptively applying a set of psychosocial resources, which aide in the management of these expectations (and, hence, the integration of the self at work), over time.

Career construction theory further recognizes that there are a variety of individual difference characteristics (e.g., personality, interests) that lead people to more or less successfully integrate their self-concepts with their work role (the outcomes of which are termed “adaptation results”; Savickas, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Specifically, the career construction model of adaptation posits that people differ in their willingness (“adaptivity” or “adaptive readiness”) and ability (“adaptability resources” or “career adaptability”) to act in ways that address their changing environmental conditions (“adapting responses”). Thus, as a phased sequence of interrelated processes, the model of adaptation suggests that adaptivity influences career adaptability which, in turn, influences adapting responses and, ultimately, adaptation results (see Savickas, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; see also Hirschi et al., 2015; Rudolph et al., 2017; Rudolph, Lavigne, Katz, & Zacher, 2017; Tolentino et al., 2014).

Finally, career construction theory adopts a narrative perspective that focuses on the dynamic processes through which people’s important life themes inform their subjective meanings of their working experiences through a process of construction, deconstruction, reconstruction, and co-construction of life stories. Such narratives can guide work behavior and explain how and why people integrate work into their lives (Savickas, 2013). Through exploration guided by career construction theory, career counselors and researchers can better understand how people construct and advance their careers in distinct ways consistent with the integration of their personality and work role into important life themes.

Although research on career construction theory is well established, there remain a number of unanswered research questions that beg for empirical elaboration. As suggested, beginning to address these questions was the primary motivation for organizing this special issue. Which open research questions remain? First, we currently do not know much about the contextual factors that shape the processes outlined by career construction theory and, in particular, the career construction model of adaptation. How do different contextual layers, including people's tasks, job characteristics, team environments, organizational characteristics, and broader socioeconomic factors influence the relationships among adaptivity, adaptability, adapting, and adaptation? Relatedly, in the context of which events and in which situations (e.g., career challenges, transitions, traumas) are career adaptability resources most effective?

Second, most quantitative research has examined propositions of career construction theory in relatively broad and rather homogeneous samples of students, employees, and job seekers. How can the theory be used and possibly extended to explain career choices, behavior, and adjustment in more specific, underrepresented, or marginalized groups (e.g., women in engineering professions; Fouad, Singh, Cappaert, Chang, & Wan, 2016; refugees; Newman, Bimrose, Nielsen, & Zacher, 2018)? Investigating propositions of career construction theory in specific groups may help to further develop the theory and identify its boundary conditions.

Third, research on career construction theory has often used assessments at a single point in time and neglected investigating dynamic changes in constructs across different time periods – from short-term fluctuations in vocational experiences and behavior (e.g., Zacher, 2015) to changes across several months or years (e.g., Guan et al., 2013) to career development and construction over the adult lifespan (e.g., Van der Horst, Klehe, & Van der Heijden, 2017). Similarly, given that the meaning of and motives for working can change with age, we need

more research that examines the role of career construction in specific phases of the lifespan (i.e., early, middle, late adulthood; e.g., Zacher & Griffin, 2015).

Fourth, more research is needed that adopts a person-centered perspective, that is, research that identifies profiles reflecting different patterns of individuals' career construction (see Sestito et al., 2015). Relatedly, many studies have investigated career adaptability resources in a uniform or aggregate way, even though different career adaptability dimensions (e.g., control vs. curiosity) represent theoretically distinct types of psychosocial resources that might have different predictors and consequences (see Rudolph et al., 2017). Gaining a better understanding of how unique constellations of career construction patterns and adaptability resources relate to adaptivity predictors and adaption outcomes would help to further refine career construction theory.

Finally, currently very few high-quality qualitative and case studies, as well as evaluations of career counselling interventions exist that are based on career construction theory and can help to gain a better understanding of idiosyncratic applications and underlying processes of effects (for exceptions, see e.g., Maree, 2015, 2016). Given the substantial impact that career construction theory has on career counseling practice, there is an urgent need to obtain more knowledge about the general effectiveness of career construction counseling interventions for different groups of clients, as well as under which conditions and for which outcomes such interventions are more or less effective.

In putting together this special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, our aim was to highlight a collection of papers that help to address these open research questions and are representative of current trends and advances in thinking about and investigating careers from the lens of career construction theory. Our goal was to showcase various contemporary ideas and

rigorously-conducted empirical studies as a means of informing broader thinking about careers and to support enhanced theorizing and practice regarding these processes. We are very pleased to say that we have achieved this goal. Next, in service of transparency, we provide details of our editorial process. Then, we discuss how the papers in this special issue help to address these important remaining research questions raised above, and how these papers individually and collectively advance our knowledge about career construction theory.

Summary of Editorial Process

We put out an open call for proposals in March of 2017. Simultaneously, we invited papers from eight eminent scholars in the field of vocational behavior. From our open call, we received 21 proposals, which were each evaluated independently by all members of the editorial team. All told, we invited eight open call papers and confirmed five of these original eight invited papers for a total of 13 manuscripts. After sending letters of invitation for these 13 manuscripts, one invitation was returned, leaving 12 manuscripts to be considered further. Once we received these 12 full manuscripts, we followed the standard review process at the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* and sent each of them out to two reviewers for double-blind peer review. Ultimately, we accepted eight of these 12 manuscripts (i.e., three from the open call; five invited). Accordingly, calculated against initial submissions and invitations, the ultimate open call acceptance rate was 14.29% and the ultimate invited acceptance rate was 62.50%.

Summary of Papers Included in the Special Issue

The eight empirical papers included in this special issue represent a diverse array of perspectives on career construction theory, employing different methods, and enriching our existing knowledge base about career construction theory by incorporating related theoretical

perspectives. Each paper reviewed next (in alphabetical order of first authors) uniquely addresses two or more of the open research questions that we suggested, above.

First, integrating theories of professional identity transformation with career construction theory, Bimrose et al. (2018) employ a qualitative methodology to investigate the adaptive responses of career counselors, who were experiencing professional identity change. More specifically, this research used a six-week online learning program that served to facilitate dialogue and reflection within a diverse sample of 80 career counselors. Applying content analysis to the dialogue and reflection provided by these career counselors during the program revealed a number of important insights into the process of psychosocial adaptation to career-related challenges.

Incorporating predictions from the lifespan development perspective with career construction theory, Fasbender, Wöhrmann, Wang, and Klehe (2018) propose and test a model that considers older workers' career adaptability and their aging experience (i.e., physical loss, social loss, personal growth, and gaining self-knowledge) as relevant factors that shape late career planning. More specifically, this research considered occupational future time perspective as an important mediating mechanism linking adaptability resources (i.e., career adaptability), experiences (i.e., aging experience), and adapting responses (i.e., late career planning). Using two-wave panel data from a sample of older workers (aged 50 to 79 years-old) from the United Kingdom, this study demonstrates that occupational future time perspective mediates the positive effects of career adaptability and personal growth, and the negative effect of physical loss on late career planning.

Next, Garcia, Restubog, Ocampo, Wang, and Tang (2018) take an innovative perspective in their study by focusing on how career adaptability resources can be transmitted across

generations. They investigated 187 grandparent-parent-grandchild triads to test if career adaptability transmits through generations. Based on social learning theory and assumed effects of role modelling, these authors expected that children learn about the importance of career adaptability resources from their parents and get inspired and motivated to develop such resources themselves. The study found support for this assumption and thereby highlights the importance of the social context, specifically the family, to advance our understanding of how career construction competencies develop.

Santilli, Nota, and Hartung (2018) report an intervention study among early adolescents that compared a career construction intervention group with a control group that underwent a more traditional career counseling intervention. Specifically, the career construction group completed the My Career Story workbook (Savickas & Hartung, 2012) and related exercises in three two-hour group sessions over the course of three weeks. The control group replied to a series of interest and values questionnaires and received a written feedback with suggestions for future school programs and job activities, accompanied by discussion and provided occupational information in a group setting. The results of the evaluation showed that the career construction intervention groups showed significantly greater gains in career adaptability resources as well as orientation toward the future than the control group. This study thereby makes an important contribution by showing that well-structured group interventions based on career construction theory can provide meaningful effects to support career development.

Sverko and Babarovic (2018) examined in two samples the relations among adaptability resources and adapting responses among adolescents in the post-school transition. Consistent with career construction theory, this study found that indicators of adaptive readiness (i.e., GPA, personality traits, core self-evaluations) related to career adaptability resources, which in turn

predicted adapting responses (i.e., engagement in career construction, career decision-making difficulties), and adaptation results (i.e., study satisfaction, study engagement, study performance). This study hence makes an important contribution to career construction research by showing how specific indicators of career construction are linked with each other over time during a critical career transition.

Urbanaviciute, Udayar, and Rossier (2018) conducted a two-wave study across two years to examine long-term effects of career adaptability on employee well-being, as well as contextual boundary conditions of these effects. Using a large representative sample of workers in Switzerland, the researchers show that career adaptability positively predicts job and life satisfaction, and negatively predicts perceived stress, over time. Interestingly, some of the effects of career adaptability on well-being outcomes were stronger when workers faced limited career prospects and experienced significant work events. Thus, overall, the study contributes to the advancement of research on career construction theory by demonstrating long-term and contextualized effects of career adaptability on important adaptation results.

Van der Horst and Klehe (2018) present results from a scalable career adaptability intervention that was designed for experienced employees in the context of an organizational restructuring. Career adaptive responses were measured pre- and post-intervention (i.e., six months later) in a sample of employees who participated in the intervention, and in a control group, respectively. Results showed that, compared to the control group, intervention participants reported increases in self-awareness and career decidedness (control), self- and environmental exploration (curiosity) and career planning (concern).

Finally, in a qualitative study based on career construction theory, Wehrle, Kira, and Klehe (2018) investigated the development and use of adaptive coping responses among refugees

who were forced to leave their home countries. The researchers conducted interviews with 36 refugees living in Germany. Results suggest that contextual barriers, such as uncertainty and lack of resources, but also contextual resources, such as work opportunities and social connections, play an important role for refugees' ability and motivation to adapt their careers. Refugees' adaptive coping responses include goal setting, proactivity, optimism, active career exploration, and networking. Overall, the study contributes to research on career construction theory by highlighting the important role of contextual factors in shaping individuals' successful use of adaptability resources and, subsequently, adaptation results (i.e., subjective and objective career success after resettlement).

[INSERT TABLE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

How the Special Issue Papers Jointly Advance Research on Career Construction Theory

The papers included in this special issue jointly help to address a number of the open research questions identified above. Table 1 maps these questions onto the studies included here. First, several papers study the role of contextual factors in career construction, including family contexts (Garcia et al., 2018), job/work/career contexts (Urbanaviciute et al., 2018; Van der Horst et al., 2018), and broader social contexts (Wehrle et al., 2018). Together, these papers highlight the importance of focusing on interactions between career actors and their environments (see Baruch & Rousseau, 2018). Second, in terms of the diversity of samples studied, career counselors (Bimrose et al., 2018), early adolescents (Santili et al., 2018), older workers (Fasbender et al., 2018), and refugees (Wehle et al., 2018) are each uniquely represented here. These studies illustrate the applicability of career construction principles in samples that differ from traditional employee and student samples. Third, a number of studies consider development over time (Bimrose et al. 2018; Sverko et al, 2018; Urbanaviciute et al., 2018; Van

der Horst et al. 2018) and two focus on lifespan perspectives, specifically (Fasbender et al., 2018; Garcia et al., 2018). Two studies included here report an examination of predictors and outcomes of career adaptability while taking the dimensionality of career adaptability into account (Santilli et al., 2018; Sverko et al., 2018). This is important, as theory predicts, and cumulative research suggests, that dimensions of career adaptability have unique relationships with adaptation results (see Rudolph et al., 2017b) and the two papers included in this special issue indicate that they might also have different predictors. Finally, studies adopting qualitative approaches (Bimrose et al., 2018; Wehrle et al., 2018) and investigating the effectiveness of interventions (Bimrose et al. 2019; Santili et al. 2018) highlight the importance of these research designs for understanding processes and outcomes of career construction.

Conclusion

The papers included in this special issue clearly challenge and advance our understanding of career construction theory. They do so by focusing on the role of context, specific populations, and development in career construction, and by using longitudinal, qualitative, and intervention methods. However, there is still much to be learned as we think ahead. Thus, as a next step, we invite readers to not only consider these works more carefully, but also to engage in future theoretical and empirical work that helps to refine career construction theory. Each of the papers presented here answers some of the open questions we raised above, but also each uniquely raises important additional issues and questions for future research to address. Thus, our great hope is that this special issue continues to inspire the (re)development and empirical examination of career construction theory.

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Table 1

Mapping special issue papers onto “open questions” in career construction theory.

Open Research Questions	Bimrose et al. (2018)	Fasbender et al. (2018)	Garcia et al. (2018)	Santilli et al. (2018)	Sverko & Barbarovic (2018)	Urbanaviciute et al. (2018)	Van der Horst et al. (2018)	Wehrle et al. (2018)
1. Diverse contexts			✓			✓	✓	✓
2. Specific samples	✓	✓		✓				✓
3. Longitudinal/lifespan development	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
4. Adaptability dimensions				✓	✓			
5. Qualitative/case/intervention studies	✓			✓				✓