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Self and Identity in Career Development: Implications for Theory and Practice

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This article expands the conceptual framework of considerations of the self and identity in career development theory and practice. A brief review of the existing self and identity constructs in career development theory is provided. Selected advances in theoretical considerations of the self and identity emerging from fields outside of the purview of career development are presented with a focus on the importance of the relational and cultural contexts. An “embeddedness” perspective is offered that describes the interdependence between intrapersonal experience and social, relational, historical, and cultural contexts. A case vignette is provided to illustrate the implications for practice of that perspective.

Since the initial theoretical statements by Parsons (1909), notions about the self and identity have been implicit or explicit in career development theory and practice. With few exceptions, most of the major theorists have included some reference to internal, relatively stable aspects of the individual that are thought to play an important role in the vocational choice and career development processes (Blustein, 1994; Osipow, 1983). In recent years, considerable interest in constructs pertaining to the self and identity has emerged from various lines of inquiry (see Adams, Gullotta, & Montemayor, 1992; Curtis, 1991; Levin, 1992; Lifton, 1993; Lopez, 1992; Strauss & Goethals, 1991). In particular, scholars of social psychology, personality theory, feminist thought, and psychoanalytic theory have developed elaborate and thoughtful notions about the self and identity that have the potential of enhancing our understanding of career development theory and counseling practice.

To foster advances in career development theory and practice, this article provides a selected review of recent innovations in the study of the self and identity. The major objectives of this article are to (a) review some of the more prominent lines of work on the self and identity, (b) develop a means of integrating these bodies of work with contemporary issues in the theory and practice of career development, and (c) to provide a theoretically informed discussion about the implications of recent innovations in conceptions of the self and identity to counseling practice.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS

In psychology, particularly social psychology and psychoanalytic theory, issues pertaining to the self and identity have become the focus of much theoretical consideration and empirical investigation (see, for example, Adams et al., 1992; Curtis, 1991; Strauss & Goethals, 1991). One typical question that arises in defining the self is how it is differentiated from personality. According to Curtis (1991), “Personality is a word that is frequently used to mean the relatively enduring dispositions of an individual. The ‘self,’ on the other hand, derived from a word meaning ‘the same,’ requires recognition, that is, awareness of sameness” (p. viii). In terms of a consensually validated definition of the self, Levin (1992) noted that such definitions are elusive; he also observed that definitions of the self represent implicit decisions about important theoretical issues. In fact, a number of scholars have noted how conceptions of the self have changed over the course of history in accordance with intellectual and social movements, thus affecting how the self is construed and defined (see, for example, Cushman, 1990, 1991, 1995; Gergen, 1991; Levin, 1992; Westen, 1991).

From the psychoanalytic perspective offered by Kohut (1977), the term self generally refers to relatively enduring aspects of an individual’s intrapsychic organization that provide the capacity to initiate action and to attain a sense of coherence, self-esteem, and consistency (see Wolf, 1988). Other theorists, particularly from the sociological, social constructionist, and social psychological perspectives, have observed that the self is anchored in a social context in which individuals derive a sense of self from their own subjective experiences, their social roles, and from various constraining and fostering social conditions (e.g., Cushman, 1990; DeCraemer, 1983; Gergen, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Another related line of work has examined the identity construct, which is most prominent within adolescent psychology (e.g., Grotevant, 1992; Josselson, 1988; Marcia, 1966; Waterman, 1985). According to Erikson (1968), the major developmental task of late adolescence involves the formation of a coherent ego. In Erikson’s theory, the resolution of the identity versus identity diffusion stage results in a stable ego identity, which refers to a set of values, belief systems, goals, and attitudes that provides individuals with a sense of coherence and continuity in their adult lives. Moreover, Erikson observed that the attainment of an identity in the vocational domain is often the most challenging and overarching aspect of the identity formation process for adolescents. As Erikson suggested, the identity formation process is thought to encompass the two related tasks of crisis (later conceptualized as exploration by identity theorists) and commitment. The literature on ego identity development has elicited an extensive and far-reaching research program, with direct implications for career development theory and practice (Blustein, 1994; Vondracek, 1992).
Relationship Between the Self and Identity

Whereas concepts of the self have emerged from philosophy, social psychology, personality theory, and psychoanalytic theory, identity generally has been examined from a more circumscribed framework. One insightful analysis of the self and identity by Wolfe (1989) concluded that the Erikson (1968) notion of ego identity captures a “narrow subset of experience” derived from “the inner sense of accord or discord between the individual and the social environment” (p. 546). This view of identity contrasts with Kohut’s (1977) psychoanalytically informed definition of the self as “a center of initiative and a recipient of impressions [that] includes more comprehensive experiences of willing and feeling” (Wolfe, 1989, pp. 546-547).

Although the contrast between the Erikson construct of identity and the more global definitions of the self provides some sense of meaning regarding the relationship between these constructs, a close look at the literature in this area further complicates the issue. Specifically, the concept of identity has often been employed in a more expansive fashion, capturing a wider range of phenomena, such as those aspects of intrapersonal experience that reflect internalized social and cultural influences (e.g., Deaux, 1991). In addition, a rich literature on racial identity has emerged (e.g., Helms, 1990) that relates to aspects of the intrapersonal experiences linked to one’s internalization of variations related to racial and ethnic status (see Helms & Piper, 1994). Moreover, there is also literature related to homosexual identity formation (e.g., Cass, 1979; Troinen, 1988), with a noteworthy recent development emerging from an application of the Helms model of racial identity to the intrapersonal experience of sexual orientation (Walters & Simoni, 1993).

Thus, the only firm conclusion that can be attained at this juncture is that any use of the terms identity or self needs to be defined by the theorist or practitioner. The existing literature is replete with ambiguously defined constructs that are often not related to similar constructs in the literature. For the purposes of clarity in this article, the term identity herein will refer to the Erikson-derived construct (e.g., Erikson, 1968), unless otherwise noted. As the reader will observe, however, many of the social-psychologically informed views of identity have been incorporated either explicitly or implicitly into the Erikson construct of identity. Also, following the recent tradition of psychoanalytic theory, the term self refers to the overarching intrapsychic organization of the individual that is responsible for volition, subjectivity, feeling, and maintaining and organizing one’s impressions of oneself (Kohut, 1977; Levin, 1992; Mitchell, 1993). Before presenting recent advances in this line of work, we review the existing self and identity constructs in contemporary career development theory.

Existing Constructs in Career Development

Each of the major career development theorists has proposed a theoretical construct as a means of understanding the contribution of intrapersonal experience to vocational behavior (Blustein, 1994). Perhaps the most elaborate of these conceptions is the contribution of Super and his colleagues (Super, 1963), who attempted to apply the phenomenologically based views of the self-concept that were used in the 1950s and 1960s to the career realm. For Super (1963, 1990), the self-concept is composed of a multidimensional structure that encompasses very specific elements (such as gregariousness and dogmatism) along with broader elements (such as clarity and self-esteem). Super (1990) has recently proposed that the self-concept aspects of his theory would be better understood from a personal construct perspective. Although Super presented his self-concept notions from a personal construct vantage point to capture “the individual’s dual focus on self and on situation” (1990, p. 222), a review of this work indicates that the situational aspects of the definition were not clearly detailed.

In person-environment fit (PE fit) theories, somewhat more parsimonious notions of the self and identity have been presented. Holland (1985) adopted some aspects of Erikson’s (1968) identity construct in his notions of identity for both the individual and the environment. For Holland, “personal identity is defined as the possession of a clear and stable picture of one’s goals, interests, and talents” (1985, p. 5). In the PE fit theory developed by LoFquist and Dawis (1991; Dawis & LoFquist, 1984), the notion of self-image is presented to account for intrapersonal experience; in this theory, the self-image represents “the individual’s perception of his or her personality, that is, of his or her psychological needs and values and of abilities for satisfying those needs and values in interactions with the main general environments (e.g., work, social, educational, family) that life presents” (1991, p. 62).

Although Bordin’s psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Bordin, Nachmann, & Segal, 1963) did not initially focus on the self and identity, his recent work (Bordin, 1990) has incorporated the Erikson (1968) notion of identity and a Kohut-influenced view of the self (1977) in his propositions about career behavior. These constructs were used to advance a number of important propositions that merit further attention. The social learning theory of Krumboltz and his associates (e.g., Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990) has employed the notion of self-observation generalization in their model of career choice and decision-making. According to this perspective, self-observation generalizations represent the internalized results of learning related to one’s task efficacy, interest, and personal values (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990).

As this brief review has indicated, the major career models each address the self and identity in ways that are consistent with the fundamental theoretical assumptions of the given theory (see Blustein, 1994, for further details on comparisons among the existing self and identity constructs). It is important to note that each of the existing constructs has yielded important contributions to theory, research, and practice. For example, a focus on the self and identity, as defined in the major current career theories, has proven to be useful in the often complex tasks of self-exploration and self-assessment. As reflected in this review, the common elements of the two constructs seem to describe relatively stable aspects of one’s psychological experiences, which are devoid of connection to one’s culture and are independent of others. As the next section details, however, important conceptual shifts are occurring in self and identity theory that have potentially significant implications for the way in which intrapersonal experience is conceived of in career development theory and practice.

THE EMERGING CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE SELF AND IDENTITY

One of the most important recent advances in considerations of the self and identity has to do with the increasingly apparent observation that any attempt at understanding intrapsychic experience necessitates a corollary need to discern the context of a given individual. In relation to the emerging views of the self and identity, context attempts to capture a number of factors that are implicated in the formation and expression of both the self and identity. More precisely, context can be operationalized to encompass contemporary as well as historical factors relating to those familial, social, and economic influences.
that affect individuals throughout the life span (Blustein, 1994; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schultenberg, 1986).

In this article, two specific aspects of the context are examined. The first domain focuses on the relational factors, which represent important advances in theory development for both the self and identity. The second domain encompasses relevant cultural factors. These two domains have been selected because of their relative lack of attention in current constructs in the career literature that are directed toward explicating the self and identity.

Relational Perspectives

The relational perspectives in psychology actually represent a group of innovations and ideas emerging from such diverse fields as psychoanalysis (e.g., Mitchell, 1988; Winnicott, 1965), feminist thought (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Kaschak, 1992), and developmental theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1982). The specific details of each of these theoretical models varies, but they have in common an emphasis on human relationships, both historical and contemporary. The relational models have provided a means of understanding and affirming basic human needs for connection and attachment throughout the life span (Josselson, 1992; Mitchell, 1988).

The shift away from traditional models of development offered by the relational perspectives is significant, particularly given that in many models of development, ideals of healthy adjustment have been based on one’s capacity to be autonomous and independent (e.g., Blos, 1979). As such, the relational models offer a view of development in which maintaining connections to one’s family and to significant others is viewed as adaptive and facilitative of growth (see Bowlby, 1982; Josselson, 1992; Lopez, 1992; Mitchell, 1988).

Relational perspectives and the self. Within concepts of the self, the contributions of Kohut (1977) represent a noteworthy illustration of relational concepts. Kohut’s theory, although clearly psychoanalytic in its origins and its epistemology, does not endorse many of the traditional aspects of drive-oriented psychoanalytic theory, such as the emphasis of psychosexual stages, the drive-oriented explanations on motivation, and the actual method of psychotherapy. (Note that a number of other innovations in psychoanalytic theory also have placed the relationships at the forefront of theory and practice. See Fairbairn, 1952; Mitchell, 1988; Sullivan, 1953; and Winnicott, 1965.)

Kohut (1977) defined the self as the initiating center of one’s personality that provides structure and cohesion to one’s experience. Rather than defining the self as an autonomous construct, Kohut proposed that the self cannot exist without the emotional supplies provided by significant others (known as “selfobject” experiences). By providing individuals with affirmation and strength via empathic attunement, positive selfobject experiences allow individuals to attain a level of self-cohesion that fosters resilience, self-esteem, access to their own talents and values, and a sense of goal directedness. Moreover, Kohut acknowledged the fundamental need that we have for selfobject experiences throughout the life span, thereby validating human striving for connection and affirmation. In sum, Kohut’s model has encouraged a view of the self as having an intrinsic connection to the relational context of individuals throughout their development, while also moving psychoanalytic theory toward a greater emphasis on the fundamental importance of relationships (see Kahn, 1985, Kohut, 1977; Wolf, 1988, and Wolfe, 1989 for an informative introduction to self psychology theory).

In sociology and social psychology, research and theory have identified a number of aspects of the self that are strongly influenced by relational influences. One of the original theoretical formulations of the self by Mead (1934) suggested that individuals attain a sense of self primarily through their social interactions. Following this sociological tradition, Gecas (1982) suggested that individuals acquire many salient aspects of their sense of self from their social relationships and from the roles they play in various social contexts. A more recent contribution by Gergen presented a view of the self that is very much influenced by relational concepts. Using social constructionist thought as his theoretical framework, Gergen argued that “the self is constructed and reconstructed in multiple contexts” (1991, p. 147). For Gergen, “relationships make possible the concept of the self . . . We appear to stand alone, but we are manifestations of relatedness” (1991, p. 170).

The work by Gergen attempted to recast views of the self from an individualistic and deterministic perspective to a more relational and fluid perspective (also see Cushman, 1995). Like the psychoanalytic theorists, Gergen viewed the self as existing within a relational nexus. However, the self psychology perspective considers the self to be considerably more enduring and inherently intrapsychic than did Gergen.

Relational perspectives and identity. As in theory construction on the self, relational influences have increasingly been evident in the ego identity domain. For example, in a series of innovative studies relying on direct observations of family interactions, Grotevant and his colleagues have demonstrated that identity exploration and commitment are likely to occur in a familial context that provides both autonomy and connectedness (e.g., Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). Other theoretical statements (e.g., Josselson, 1988; Marcia, 1988) and empirical studies (e.g., Schulteiss & Blustein, 1994) have essentially corroborated the view that identity development occurs most adaptively in a family environment that provides emotional support and fosters autonomy.

Relationships influence not only the process of identity formation but its content as well. Most scholars (e.g., Adams et al., 1992) in this line of work consider two broad domains of identity consisting of ideological areas (e.g., vocational identity, religious, and political ideologies) and interpersonal areas (e.g., friendship, dating relationships, and gender roles). Thus, the actual content of identity includes specific attention to relational factors. In addition, with the inclusion of feminist thought, considerations of identity theory have become more explicitly relational (see Archer, 1992). Consequently, relational factors provide an important contextual component of both the process of identity formation and the actual content of identity.

Cultural Perspectives

In addition to relational factors, the self and identity have often been examined in light of a cultural matrix. The focus on culture, summarized as follows, provides a means for counselors to understand how the definitions of the self and identity, along with their means of expression in the social world, are influenced by individuals’ experience of their culture.

Culture and the self. Although psychoanalytic views of the self have not generally addressed broader cultural issues (see Cushman, 1991), several recent contributions have provided useful perspectives with respect to the relationship between culture and the self. In an excellent analysis of the impact of culture on the self, Markus and Kitayama (1991) developed the notions of an independent self and an interdependent self. The independent self, which is characteristic of Western societies, construes the self as being separate from others. In contrast, the interdependent self, which is more common among non-Western societies, defines the self as being interconnected to others within the social context. These contrasting conceptions of the self imply a host of ramifications, entailing motivational, cogni-
tive, and emotional processes. In Western societies, the self is viewed as unitary and stable, but in non-Western societies, the self is viewed as flexible and varied. Moreover, the locus of self-attention in Western societies is thought to encompass private and internal psychological states. In contrast, the interdependent self employs an external locus of attention with more public expression.

Similarly, DeCraemer (1983), in his descriptive analysis of the conceptions of personhood in central Africa and Japan, compares these two cultures with each other and with a Western view of personhood. Although central African and Japanese views of the person differ from one another, they share a perspective on the person that is accepted by most non-Western societies and cultures in the world. For DeCraemer, these cultures "not only recognize, but emphasize the contextual, relational nature of personhood, its inseparability from social solidarity, its body-and-psychic, as well as self-and-other holistic, and its 'inner,' emotive, symbolic, and ritual aspects" (1983, p. 32). This cross-cultural exploration is intended to detail the extent to which non-Western societies view the self as defined and embedded in a system of relationships, and the extent to which the Western or American view of the self is individualistic, rational and analytic, positivistic and legalistic.

Also building on a similar cross-cultural analysis of the self, Cushman (1991) argued that concepts of the self emerging from traditional, psychological theory imply "that only one view of the self—the current, Western self—is predesignated and that all the rest are aberrations, primitive misunderstandings, or poor copies" (p. 212). Cushman (1995) further proposed that the current, Western view of the self is profoundly influenced by the culture of Western society in which problems in intrapersonal experience (such as feelings of emptiness, disconnection from others, and isolation) are understood to represent the direct result of natural developmental processes rather than the implications of vast social or economic disparities. Inherent in the Cushman view is the notion that the self, as it is presently articulated in many current psychological theories, is a product of specific cultural values as opposed to an enduring attribute of human nature. Although we do not concur entirely with Cushman's position that the self is exclusively a socially constructed entity, we believe that the view proposed by Cushman raises important points about the degree to which the self is bound by culture and historical forces.

Culture and identity. Beginning with Erikson's (1968) innovative work, there has been a concerted interest in understanding how historical and social forces influence the identity formation process. This foundation has been followed by numerous investigators and theorists, who have pursued a number of vigorous lines of inquiry with respect to the role of culture in identity.

Grotevant (1992) presented a view of identity in which chosen aspects of identity are contrasted with assigned aspects. Grotevant noted that gender and ethnicity represented selected aspects of the assigned components of identity. In effect, the range of exploratory experiences, which is critical to effective identity resolution, can be constrained or enhanced by broad social and contextual factors based on gender and ethnicity. Another useful contribution by Phinney and Rosenthal (1992) contrasted ethnic identity with ego identity. Ethnic identity is defined as "a social identity; its meaning is embedded in the culture to which one belongs" (p. 149). As in Grotevant's notion of the assigned identity, one's ethnic identity is not chosen, but is part of one's cultural heritage.

When considering the various cultural influences in tandem, it becomes clear that any consideration of an individual's identity needs to attend to how a particular culture becomes embodied into one's psychological life. Following recent social constructionist critiques (e.g., Cushman, 1991, 1995; Gergen, 1991), it seems likely that the definition of identity varies across cultures and time frames (see Deaux, 1991). Thus, the notion of a coherent and stable ego identity, which has been central in recent psychological discourse, may not be a universal quality, but may actually reflect desired attributes of contemporary Western culture (Cushman, 1991). Many questions remain in this area (such as identifying how culture is internalized into one's identity), but the literature reviewed thus far points to the clear role of culture in defining both the content of one's identity and the process of identity formation.

Concluding Points
In integrating the literature that we have presented thus far, a number of important observations are evident. First, the development and maintenance of an individual's self and identity is increasingly understood as occurring within a relational matrix in which one's early family history and current relationships furnish the necessary emotional supplies for healthy developmental progress (Kohut, 1977; Josselson, 1992; Mitchell, 1993). Second, recent literature on self and identity points to the inherent difficulty in understanding an individual's intrapsychic organization and intrapersonal experience without an explicit focus on the cultural context (Cushman, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Third, given the context-based view of the self and identity that is evident in this review, it would seem prudent to consider the possibility of reinvigorating conceptualizations of the self and identity in the career realm. A careful examination of career development tasks throughout the life span suggests that implementing career choices and adjusting to the ever-increasing demands of one's work tasks necessitates ongoing interactions between an individual's self and identity and his or her social and cultural contexts. As such, the career realm represents perhaps one of the more important arenas in which to consider a more context-based concept of the self and identity. The next section of this article presents a perspective that has the potential of expanding existing views of the self and identity in career development to incorporate the relational and cultural context that so pervasively influences our intrapersonal experiences.

TOWARD A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF THE SELF AND IDENTITY IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT
Parallel to the changes in conceptions of the self and identity that have been detailed are equally profound changes in the nature of employment opportunities and work throughout the Western world (Herr, 1990; Reich, 1991). From a broader economic perspective, the emergence of the global marketplace has introduced considerable competition among countries, which has resulted in the dislocations of entire industries and the loss of countless job opportunities in many industrialized nations (Marshall & Tucker, 1992). It is important to note that these changes in the labor market have affected the entire array of the workforce, including unskilled laborers, semiskilled workers, and highly skilled professionals (Reich, 1991). As many workers throughout the Western world have discovered, the stability of one's employment opportunities is undergoing rapid changes, resulting in unemployment and a constricting job market. At the same time, the nature of the actual workplace is changing in a number of ways that are relevant to the present discussion. For example, many organizations have a much less hierarchical structure than in the past; many middle-level managers have been dismissed or transferred. In addition, the increase in the proportion of women and racial and
ethnic minorities in the workplace has influenced many aspects of the occupational world. Furthermore, the need for workers to take increasing levels of responsibility in their work has been an important aspect of the organizational changes in recent years. Taken together, these changes in the labor market and the workplace are introducing a discernible sense of uncertainty in career development that has been felt across the occupational spectrum (see Marshall & Tucker, 1992, and Reich, 1991, for more extensive reviews of these changes.)

The implications of these changes in the workforce coupled with the shifting conceptual views of the self and identity have an analogous impact in career development. More specifically, each of these movements is introducing a sense of relativism and instability with respect to the self and identity. For example, shortly after World War II (when most career theories were being developed and tested), a middle-class White man from a Western country would typically engage in career decision making primarily during late adolescence and would seek to answer the question of “Who am I?” by attaining a stable and enduring self-concept. This individual would generally be reasonably certain that his line of work would not change dramatically and that his employment opportunities, although certainly vulnerable to modest economic shifts, would not undergo dramatic changes. Currently, such a stable sense of self or identity is very likely compromised by the need to engage in career exploration and decision making throughout one’s adult life (Marshall & Tucker, 1992). Furthermore, some individuals are faced with the task of developing new careers in adulthood as their skills and training become outmoded or their job prospects disappear.

Thus, we are currently witnessing parallel changes in the volatile economic milieu and in the increasingly context-based conceptualizations of the self and identity. These changes are fostering a view of the self and identity that is far more relativistic and culturally bound when compared with the existing constructs in career development. Consequently, as individuals seek ways to learn about themselves and maintain a degree of inner cohesion, they are also becoming aware that an exploratory and open attitude to their increasingly diverse experiences is needed to adapt to changing circumstances. At the same time, a number of theorists (e.g., Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) have raised important questions about the nature of intrapersonal experience and have observed significant variability in concepts of the self depending on historical forces, cultural influences, and social factors.

Given the prevalence of such powerful changes, one may be tempted to ask if we can ever really know ourselves, or are we forever caught in a web of nothingness. Our view is that these changes do not necessarily suggest a self or identity that is totally devoid of internal structure, coherence, or meaning. We acknowledge that concepts of the self are based on specific social mores (e.g., Cushman, 1990; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), but we also believe that an internal structure exists within each of us, with its meaning strongly influenced by cultural assumptions about intrapersonal experience. Following the social constructionist argument (see Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991), we acknowledge that the language and meaning of the self and identity is defined and also constrained by social, political, and historical forces. Thus, we posit that views of the self and identity need to acknowledge a sense of relativism while affirming the importance of a core of fundamental psychological experiences (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Kohut, 1977).

Implications for Theory: The Embeddedness Perspective

As a means of integrating the material on the relational and cultural influences on the self and identity, we propose the concept of “embeddedness” as a means of enhancing current considerations of the self and identity in career development theory. Encompassing both the relational and cultural influences, embeddedness is a way of underscoring an interdependence between individuals and their psychological, social, historical, and cultural contexts (Blustein, 1994; Josselson, 1988, 1992; Lerner, Skinner, & Sorrel, 1980; Vondracek et al., 1986). As Josselson noted, embeddedness is presented as “the soil in which other relatedness grows. Our connections to others always exist within a cultural set of meanings that form a web of interdependence as well as a lexicon for interpretation of experience” (1992, p. 179). In an earlier contribution, Josselson (1988) presented the notion of the embedded self as a means of interpreting traditional views of the self as autonomous and independent. For Josselson, the self is inherently relational; as such, it needs to come from an embedded context that allows for an understanding of the importance of relationships throughout the wide array of intrapsychic experiences.

Drawing from the work of Josselson (1988) as well as other scholars (e.g., Forrest & Mikolaitis, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Vondracek et al., 1986), Blustein (1994) developed an analogous concept known as the embedded identity. Following the framework outlined by Erikson (1968), the embedded identity captures the self-sameness and core elements of one’s internal experience. Yet the embedded identity also attempts to incorporate many of the relational and cultural influences by placing the identity construct into a clearly embedded nexus. More specifically, the embedded identity places the core elements of the Erikson ego identity construct in the context of one’s contemporary and historical familial factors and relevant sociocultural factors (see Blustein, 1994).

Building on the contributions of theorists within and outside the career development domain (e.g., Blustein, 1994; Josselson, 1988, 1992; Forrest & Mikolaitis, 1986; Lifton, 1993; Vondracek et al., 1986), we propose expanding the conceptual definition of the self and identity in the career realm to encompass an embeddedness perspective. An embeddedness perspective is designed to offer career development scholars and practitioners an explicit means of integrating the vast and important array of contextual factors into a dynamic conception of intrapersonal experience. Rather than offering a new construct, we propose a new perspective or conceptual lens with which to view intrapersonal experience. We use the term embedded prior to the use of the terms self or identity in career development theory and practice, thereby encouraging practitioners to consider carefully the relational and cultural aspects of an individual’s intrapersonal experience. The embeddedness of one’s self or identity, therefore, takes precedent both semantically and conceptually. (This proposal is based on our belief that career development theory has more than enough constructs, many of which are highly similar; instead, we suggest that our field is in need of qualifying perspectives that function to enrich our view of clients. In effect, we believe that our inquiry need to develop more adjectives for the plethora of nouns that we use.)

Consistent with the work of Josselson (1988) and Blustein (1994), the embeddedness perspective focuses on the relational and cultural contexts; however, the embeddedness perspective presented herein is not linked directly to a particular conceptual aspect of the self and identity literature, as is the case in the contributions of Josselson and Blustein. As in the rich contributions of life span developmental theorists (e.g., Lerner et al., 1980; Vondracek et al., 1986), our view shares the commitment to nest psychological constructs into a broad context that embraces social, cultural, historical, intrapersonal, and organizational influences. Because of our concern with the relative neglect of relational and cultural factors in considerations of the self.
and identity, we have elected to focus on a circumscribed group of factors pertaining to relational and cultural contexts in our definition of embeddedness.

Although our intention has not been to offer a new theoretical model, we believe that the embeddedness perspective has a number of important implications for further theoretical and research efforts in career development. By applying an embeddedness perspective to a given theory’s self or identity construct, it may be possible to build cultural and relational factors more explicitly into a theory. The new perspective can be useful in developing flexible theoretical models for the career development and career counseling domains, which will be particularly advantageous in an era of constant social and occupational flux (Gergen, 1991; Reich, 1991). For example, as individuals are faced with increasingly uncertain labor conditions and the need to adapt their talents or develop new skills, a view of the self and identity that attends to the context would be particularly helpful in designing theory and counseling interventions. In addition, following the suggestions of Blustein (1994) and Josselson (1988), the focus on an embeddedness perspective may help to integrate the role of relationships more systematically into the career domain. Further scholarly work using an embeddedness perspective may help to bridge the artificial boundaries that exist between career counseling and counseling in the noncareer domain (Blustein & Spengler, 1995; Richardson, 1993; Savickas, 1991). As a means of illustrating our perspective, the next section examines how an embedded view of the self and identity can enrich counseling practice.

Implications for Practice

By explicitly considering the embeddedness of the self and identity, counselors have the potential of attending to aspects of the client’s experience that may be overlooked using traditional approaches to exploration of the self and identity. Thus, rather than viewing variations in interpersonal experiences that may inhibit career development (e.g., a diffuse and unfocused sense of self) as an intrinsic deficit in self-structure or a result of maladaptive learning experiences, the embeddedness perspective suggests that the counselor examine the context of this self experience. For example, clients presenting with a shifting or unfocused identity may reflect a history of inadequate relational support in their lives, thereby suggesting the utility of an integrated counseling approach, focusing on career and noncareer issues (Blustein & Spengler, 1995). By providing a supportive counseling climate that explores the history and consequences of the client’s relational environment, it may be possible to foster an exploration of different aspects of the self and the environment, thereby enhancing the self-knowledge that is integral to the career development process (Super, 1963).

The embeddedness perspective also offers counselors an opportunity to consider how cultural aspects of the client’s life may be experienced. As our review has indicated, the independent self is a uniquely Western construct; thus, clients from cultures that affirm a more interdependent self need to be understood from an embeddedness perspective so that their self and identity is not viewed as intrinsically dysfunctional or pathological. The following case example provides an illustration of how to apply an embeddedness perspective in practice.

Anne is a 29-year-old, White, heterosexual woman of Irish-American descent who was raised in a working-class family in a small midwestern town in the United States. She has been living in a large, northeastern city for the past 6 years. Initially, she entered counseling with concerns about her capacity to form an intimate attachment with a man. She also wished to work on some career issues, although she stated that she had already received some career counseling in the past. In effect, Anne wished to work on both career and noncareer issues.

Anne held a midlevel management position in a computer company and presented herself as advancing into a more senior level position over time. What emerged, however, was the extent to which Anne was unable to manage the organizational aspects (e.g., implicit norms, covert alliances) of her work life. Although she was competent and an extremely dedicated employee, she felt that she did not respond well to the competitive demands of the corporate environment.

A close examination of Anne’s work life revealed that her high moral standards interfered with her capacity to tolerate much of the standard behavior of corporate life. In particular, she had a tendency to judge events that transpired in the office as unfair. Whenever her concept of fairness was violated, she became outraged. For example, she would often experience her coworkers acting in a deceitful and exaggerated manner to make themselves look good to seek promotion, but she described herself as a hard worker who was loyal to the company whose contributions often went unacknowledged. When the forthright competitiveness of her colleagues resulted in promotions and success, she responded with rage and withdrawal.

It was not long before Anne developed a reputation as someone not to be crossed, as someone to be feared. This alienation led to her inability to work collaboratively with other people in the office. Not surprisingly, her willingness to “play by the rules” led to her being passed over for a promotion. The accumulation of anger and her sense of isolation resulted in her leaving the company. She decided to use temporary employment for financial survival until she could decide what she wanted to pursue next. She had a vague awareness that working in a corporate setting was not a good fit for her, and the difficulties she encountered were at least, in part, about a conflict in values between herself and the environment in which she worked.

Until the time of resignation from her job, the counselor understood Anne’s difficulties as having to do only with her intrapsychic structure. The focus of counseling had been on expanding her view of herself, identifying what behaviors in others triggered her responses, and learning more about the impact that she had on her coworkers. Her high moral standards were viewed as an important aspect of her personality. By using an embeddedness perspective to explore Anne’s interests and abilities in conjunction with her intrapersonal experience, the work of counseling expanded to include a relationally and culturally informed view of Anne’s self and identity. The embeddedness perspective encouraged the counselor to attend carefully to the cultural data that emerged during the course of counseling. It became clear, for example, that Anne’s strict morality was influenced by her experience of her Irish-Catholic roots and her commitment to religious beliefs. Her strict Catholic upbringing taught her to be honest, forthright, and direct and did not sensitize her to the competitive processes of group and organizational life. To play by the rules of corporate life, therefore, was to be disloyal to a significant aspect of her identity. In her view, she could not be a successful corporate executive and a successful Irish Catholic. To understand fully Anne’s career “failure,” cultural influences needed to be taken into account. This conceptualization enabled Anne to restore a positive sense of herself and gain a greater appreciation for the complexity of her identity. As she continued her career exploration, she considered whether her religious values would be in conflict with her career choice and what types of settings would allow her to express her self more fully.
One possibility Anne explored was working in a social service agency where the altruistic mission of the organization downplayed the competitive aspects of the work environment. It was her hope that she could join more easily with the goals of the organization and that this more integrated sense of purpose would sustain her. From Anne’s perspective, it was possible to be successful in a social service position and remain loyal to her Irish-Catholic beliefs. From the counselor’s vantage point, this decision excluded the possibility that Anne was responding to powerful sociocultural messages regarding gender and competition. Ruthless self-interest certainly conflicts with Christian values, but it is also true that women are socialized to tame their competitive and ambitious striving. Choosing to work in a setting where the caretaking of others was the primary task may have allowed Anne to avoid confronting the contextual elements of her gender identity. In this instance, the counselor’s use of a context-rich framework provided Anne with the opportunity to examine the impact of her gender role socialization on her career decision. Was she yielding to social pressure to be more “feminine,” or was she choosing a career that allowed her to express a more coherent sense of self?

Although the case material presented thus far illustrates the ways in which cultural factors influenced Anne’s career choice and adjustment, there is another factor that played a significant role in Anne’s desire to pursue a social service career. Just before resigning from the corporation, she developed a committed relationship with a man whom she was planning to marry. As the confluence of these events was explored, it seemed that Anne believed that a corporate career was in conflict with her image of herself as a wife. One of her major concerns was her lack of time and energy for household duties and attention to the relationship. A less time-intensive career, in her view, would allow her to manage a more balanced life.

Although the conflicting demands of personal life and work life are universal, Anne’s difficulties seemed rooted in the embeddedness of her self and identity. At the core of her conflict is the idea that she did not deserve to have a satisfying marriage and a satisfying career. A significant aspect of who she was centered around being a good wife and a good mother. In her words, it should be enough for her to be happily married with the possibility of raising a family. After all, what right did she have to “have it all?” She could forgive herself for earning a high salary and dedicating herself to her career when she was financially responsible for herself; however, in the context of a relationship with a man, other aspects of her identity emerged. Pursuing a career in a social service agency would be more consistent with how she viewed herself as a wife. Even if she found satisfaction in her new career, it would be in service of caring for others. Anne could remain a good Catholic and a good woman in her point of view.

Through further exploration of the meaning of Anne’s choice to work in a social service agency, it became apparent that Anne was able to tolerate the anxiety associated with surpassing the social class of her family of origin only on a temporary basis. The relatively lower compensation in a social service agency, as compared with a corporate position, would allow her to remain consistent with the socioeconomic level of her familial roots.

Anne’s decision to choose a career that would allow the more expressive aspects of her personality to emerge, however, left the unexamined possibility that she is responding to societal expectations about women. The degree to which she questions how deserving she is of maintaining a career and a marriage provides some evidence that she is enacting internalized social mores that support the devaluation of women. It is only through exploration of the context that surrounds Anne’s intrapersonal experience that the relational and cultural aspects of her identity can be illuminated. One outcome, then, would be that Anne’s decision to work in a social service agency and devote time and energy to the roles of wife and mother would be the result of her enhanced sense of the embeddedness of her identity. Although her decision may not change as a result of further work in counseling, she may develop a deeper appreciation for the multiple influences on her self and identity.

In this case, counseling could help Anne shift her focus from evaluating the kind of woman she is to understanding the impact of sociocultural factors on her sense of self; gaining a more complete picture of herself in relation to the historical, familial, and sociocultural context in which she developed; and fostering an appreciation for the influence of her relationships and the meaning of these relationships in her life. Only through understanding the confluence of these factors on her identity development can the counselor help Anne to bring her intrapersonal experience into focus. Thus, by helping Anne to assess the degree to which her conflicts reflected internalized social mores, it became possible to empower her to make more informed decisions about how she wished to express her self in the career domain.

The final factor that warrants illumination is the place of the practitioner’s embedded identity in the counseling process. As in all interpersonal endeavors, for practitioners to work effectively from an embeddedness perspective it is essential that they are aware of what they bring to the interaction. For example, Anne’s female counselor may not have been aware of the impact of her own cultural and religious upbringing when she initially conceptualized the problem as purely intrapsychic. Until she examined her own embeddedness, she was not free to examine the impact of these factors on Anne. Furthermore, when it became apparent that an aspect of Anne’s conflict was embedded in her identity as a woman, the counselor had to explore her own gender identity and make explicit how it was influencing the counseling process. For example, it is entirely possible that the counselor had internalized messages about the place of women in the world of work. Only through the counselor’s confrontation of her own collusion with socially dictated mores will she be able to raise these issues with Anne. Parallel processes (Mueller & Kell, 1972) are inherent in the work of counseling; it is the use of the data that emerges from the parallels that is essential to working from a context-rich perspective.

Summary

Inherent in a model of career counseling that addresses embeddedness is the belief that contemporary and historical familial factors and sociocultural factors are not just additive, but have a reciprocal influence on other aspects of self and identity. In the case presented here, it is not enough to add as an afterthought that, of course, the economic, political, and social position of women has an impact on Anne’s access to the opportunity structure; instead, practitioners must be able to understand the complexity of exploring the confluence and integration of all factors on a person’s identity.

As this case illustrates, the embeddedness perspective yields a framework for working with clients as opposed to a set of specific recommendations or a precise model. Anne shifted her view of herself within the course of counseling to accommodate an enhanced sense of awareness of the richness of her self and her identity. The counselor did not view such shifts as signs of a lack of vocational self-concept crystallization or a deficit in her vocational identity. One of the major implications for counselors is to consider the context of a client’s self and identity in a broad and expansive fashion. The embeddedness perspective encourages practitioners to bring the ground
that has helped to create and sustain the self and identity to a position that is equal to the traditional prominence of intrapsychic factors in counseling.

The counselor who is attentive to the embeddedness of a client's self and identity will be able to dignify different modes of expression of one's intrapersonal experience, while also helping the client to adjust to the reality of the social demands of work. Thus, we are clearly not suggesting that counselors avoid the discussion of how one's self and identity may be manifested within the parameters of the social structure. Yet we believe that devoting explicit attention to the way in which the existing power structure influences intrapersonal experiences is also indicated in counseling. For example, counselors working with individuals from visible racial and ethnic groups who have been economically disenfranchised may find it particularly useful to discuss how the dominant culture may have influenced a given client's self and identity. In our view, counselors who seek to apply an embeddedness perspective to practice have an opportunity to validate increasingly varied expressions of their clients' self and identity while addressing the relational and cultural matrix that helped to establish and provide meaning for their clients' inner experience.

CONCLUSION

Our intention has been to introduce some of the innovative ideas emerging from recent theory and research on the self and identity to the career development domain. In extracting some potentially relevant ideas from this body of work, we identified the importance of the relational and cultural aspects of the context that exists within intrapersonal experience. Following the perspective of Josselson (1988, 1992) and others (Forrest & Mikolaitis, 1986; Grovevant, 1992; Vondracek, 1992), we defined the notion of embeddedness as a means of fostering a context-rich view of the self and identity. As illustrated in the case study, an embedded view of the self and identity provides a means of understanding the increasingly complex network of factors that influence the development and expression of these concepts. In closing, we hope that the embeddedness perspective will promote the sort of advances in theory and practice that are needed as cultural and economic contexts continually reshape the nature of both our intrapersonal experiences and career lives.

REFERENCES


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