

# CHAPTER 22

## Adult Career Development: Some Perspectives On The Future

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As a context for looking to the future of adult career development, it is useful to use the recent past as a frame of reference. In such a context, adult career development is, in relative terms, a new term and a new concept. A generation or so ago, the term “adult career development” would have been rarely used. At that time, the focus tended to be on the expectation that most individuals made their choice of an occupation and an employer in late adolescence and in their early 20s and then in adulthood they implemented the career path that followed from these earlier choices. The implicit assumption, with few exceptions, was that the importance of career exploration and choice tended to be at the front end of one’s career, not distributed throughout the life span. The periods of the middle adult years and later years were described by a language that emphasized linear careers, stability (usually defined by long-term employment in one firm or workplace), a steady and predictable rise in responsibilities and income, and such perspectives were captured in words like consolidation, maintenance, plateauing, deceleration.

Further, most theoretical perspectives in the middle third of the 20th century spoke to the career development of men, typically white and relatively well educated, not to the career development of women, persons of color, or poor persons. Again, with important exceptions (Super, 1957; Krumboltz, 1979, 1994; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986), the emphasis was on individual career development, not on the interaction of individual, corporate and societal career development as interactive. In an overly caricatured sense, conceptions of adult career development were not sufficiently *contextualized*. A lack of *contextualization* of human behavior fails to fully embrace the view that neither theories nor the problems that people bring to counselors exist in a vacuum. Within such a limited perspective of the influences on individuals, career development can be seen as homogenized, similar for all people in all places, cultural factors and gender can be downplayed as major influences on career identity and the actions that ensue, the effects of the environment in which people live are benign, and change is rare, not a constant in one’s life.

In contrast to such views, the theories and interventions presented in the earlier chapters of this book paint a different view of adult career development. We have learned that adulthood is dynamic: workers make choices, enter and leave different jobs and career paths, explore and reinvent themselves. Many of the jobs and the processes used at work were not known and could not be explored when the typical 50 year old worker of today was entering the workforce 30 or more years ago. But,

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they have had to adapt to and learn to implement organizational forms and job tools that did not exist when they were beginning to forge their careers. When they entered their careers, the contemporary pervasiveness of computer technology, telecommunications, satellites, the global economy were not yet issues. Until 1995, there was no Internet available for general application in the workplace. Jobs and workplaces were considered bound by location, geography, and political sovereignty. No longer are these things true. Indeed, the effects of advanced technology and international economic competition have changed the language of work, the organization of work, how and where work is done, and by whom.

Specific elements of the context in which adult career development is shaped and executed are wide-ranging. Examples include the accelerated change in the nature of the work available to be done; the steady decline of jobs available in certain sectors (e.g., manufacturing); the emerging skills and preparation required to work in many occupations and settings; the shifting of selected jobs from one nation to another; the high unemployment rates in many parts of the world; the current affirmation that in a global economy the primary asset in the economic development of any nation is the literacy, numeracy, communication and computer skills of its workforce.

The technological and political factors that are rapidly changing the occupational structures of the world are also changing the types of jobs and work arrangements available to people in different nations (Rifkin, 1996). For example, Handy, a British scholar of management, (1994) has suggested a conceptualization of the workforces in most of Europe and North America as being divided into three concentric rings: the small circle in the middle is the permanent workforce needed by employers to do the critical tasks required in a particular work organization. These are the people with relatively long-term security, excellent benefits and income and with support for their learning and re-learning as the organizational work processes change. The second ring is comprised of contingent workers: essentially part-time workers whose skills are purchased for limited amounts of time (e.g., retail workers for the winter holiday season; farm workers for the summer harvesting season; workers to do specific projects of a time-limited nature). These are persons who frequently have several part-time jobs, but no long-term institutional identity; they frequently lack health and other benefits available to permanent workers and have little employment security. The third ring of workers is identified with specialty firms that do outsourcing: they take on particular functions that employers traditionally handled in-house with a permanent workforce but now find it less expensive to subcontract with another firm to handle for them (e.g., accounting, advertising, food services, marketing, security, legal services, custodial services). The persons working for outsourcing firms may also be contingent, part-time workers or they may be more permanent employees with outsourcing firms who are assigned to fulfill contracted tasks with specific firms or workplaces with which they have no long-term identity.

The outcomes of Handy's conceptualization of the occupational structure or of a particular firm have many corollary implications. One is that the traditional image of employment—long-term, full and permanent employment with one employer—is no longer a reality for most persons and it gives rise to many forms of alternate employment patterns. In a special issue of the *Monthly Labor Review* (Hipple, 2001), some of these patterns were discussed. Some 5.6 million workers, some 4.3 percent of total employment in 1999, held contingent jobs, jobs structured to be short-term

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or temporary, not expected to continue. As full-time unemployment rates rise, the percentage of contingent workers also rises. Many of these persons work through temporary help agencies and range in skills across occupations such as those of physicians, biological and life scientists, actors and directors, construction workers, library clerks, interviewers, general office clerks, receptionists, and typists. Contingent workers are much more likely to hold multiple jobs than non-contingent workers, be younger, earn less, have no employer-provided health insurance or pension plans, be foreign born or minority. Within the broad spectrum of contingency workers are several categories used by the U.S. government. They include independent contractors; consultants and freelance workers who are essentially self-employed; on-call workers who are called into work only when needed; temporary help agency workers who are paid by a temporary help agency; workers provided by contract firms, who may work for only one customer at the customer's work site or for several customers (DiNatale, 2001). Almost 10 percent of the workforce now has workweeks that are variable and thus unpredictable from week to week (Golden, 2001).

While there is much more that could be said about the three rings—permanent, contingent, outsource workers—suggested by Handy, it seems clear that the workers in each of these categories have in common the need to keep their skills current and focused in areas that employers, temporary help agencies, outsource firms want to purchase on a contingent or non-contingent basis. Many of these workers must be committed to continuous learning in order to possess the competencies that can be sold to employers. And, there is the added implication that increasingly each of these categories of workers is his or her own career manager. That is to say that many employers do not accept responsibility for their employees' career development; they see this as the individual employee's responsibility if they want to remain employed. In such a context, the fundamental relationship between employer and employee changes and the role of the employee in maintaining competencies that are salable and current becomes a major prerequisite to remaining employed. Some observers would argue that the employee, in addition to technical skills, must possess the personal flexibility (Herr & Cramer, 1996) by which to cope with constantly changing employment conditions and requirements.

Such perspectives have led some researchers to argue that new patterns of careers are taking place that are qualitatively different from those traditionally assumed by many adult career development theories. For example, Arnold and Jackson (1997) have argued that the changes in the way work is organized and structured have affected how notions of "new careers" need to be conceived in many nations. They state:

The changes taking place in the structure of employment opportunities mean a widening diversity of career patterns and experiences ... more and different sorts of career transitions will be taking place. One consequence may be that in the future more men will experience the kind of fragmented careers that many women have experienced (p. 428) ... more people will be working for small and medium-sized employers, and there will be more people who are self-employed ... they highlight the need for lifelong learning and an appropriate strategy for career guidance to support people especially during career transitions ... the new career recognizes both the changed objective realities in which careers are being developed and also the universality of people's intense involvement with the subjective aspects of their careers (p. 429).

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In essentially a parallel perspective, Hall and Associates (1996) discuss *Protean Careers*. They suggest that:

People's careers increasingly will become a succession of 'ministages' (or short cycle learning stages) of exploration-trial-mastery-exit, as they move into and out of various product areas, technologies, functions, organizations, and other work environments (p.33) . . . this protean form of career involves horizontal growth, expanding one's range of competencies and ways of connecting to work and other people, as opposed to the more traditional vertical growth of success (upward mobility). In the protean form of growth, the goal is learning, psychological success, and expansion of the identity. In the more traditional form, the goal was advancement, success and esteem in the eyes of others, and power (p. 35).

It might be noted here that the use of the term "protean" by Hall and his Associates is derived from the mythology of the Greek Sea God Proteus who was believed to have a many-sided self and was able to transform himself into many forms as circumstances required (Lifton, 1993). Although constancy and stability have frequently been touted in the psychological literature as desirable traits for individual growth and development, adult career development in the future is likely to be more ad hoc, more spontaneous, more embedded in environmental and organizational flux, unpredictability and turbulence.

An obvious point here is that persons are shaped by the environmental conditions to which they are exposed and which they must learn to manage. Super (1984) addressed such a point as follows:

Career behavior and development do not unfold separately and independently from the world of work and the personal, social, and economic environments and sanctions within it. The relationship is reciprocal and interactive. As a result, professions need a thorough understanding of the work world so that they are able 1) to appreciate its impact on the dynamics of career behavior and development and 2) to empower individuals with whom they work to become competent, achieving persons by effectively managing their talents in the work environment (Super, 1984, p. 25).

## Implications for Adult Career Development Theory

Super's comments obviously have implications for theory in adult career development just as do the comments about the Protean Self, the individual as his or her own career manager, the changing work patterns—permanent, contingent, outsource—now arising around the world, who populates what occupational strata, and needs for personal flexibility.

These issues raise serious questions about the content and breadth of perspective of contemporary adult career development theories. In particular, do available theories adequately reflect the changing nature of work—as contingent, potentially more fragmented and multi-staged; the changing relationships between workers

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and employers; the need for individual workers to have greater personal flexibility and be their own career manager; and the increasing need for many workers to conceptualize the work they do as not bound by geographic or time constraints, but to occur within the global environment with its attendant competitive pressures from other nations and workers for American jobs and processes?

There are also other implications for such theory that include:

1. To understand human behavior and the potential influences on career development is to understand that people live in various social, cultural, political, and economic environments. These environments exert influence or apply limits to the conceptions of work roles and work ethics, the achievement images being reinforced, the cognitive and interpersonal styles rewarded, the resources available, and the forms and comprehensiveness of information provided. The mixes of environments through which persons negotiate their identity are affected by birth order, place of birth, cultural traditions, socioeconomic status, history and many other factors. "Such environments are not static. They are constantly changing, and individuals are under constant pressure to receive, interpret, and act upon messages related to personal behavior that emanate from these environmental mixes" (Herr, 1999, p. 6).
2. The issue of how persons think about the environments they occupy is also relevant here. Do they conceptualize themselves as bound to a specific physical location, a particular town or city, that determines the skills they will need to forge and to play out their career aspirations. If so, how do they interpret their role in a world of global competitiveness, in which the products or services they help to produce are likely to be part of a complex import-export network which changes and makes more important the issues of quality standards, production costs, understanding of one's competitors and potential consumers, the economies and social systems in which these competitors and consumers function? Do these workers consider the implications for them of the globalization of the workforce and the growing cross-national mobility of workers; the growing labor surplus, frequently including highly trained and skilled workers, many of whom seek to obtain work in the United States or other developed, industrial nations; the rising importance of the knowledge worker and of literacy, numeracy, communication, and computer literacy skills as prerequisites for employability and lifelong training in many of the emerging occupations; the need for workers to have a world view that facilitates adaptation and flexibility to deal with change? Should these perspectives be understood by workers? Should they be incorporated into adult career development theory? In a world filled with economic systems and occupational structures in flux, such dynamics would appear to have increasing relevance to the future understanding of adult career development and its transactional quality.
3. Views of the transactional nature of human behavior have been undergoing change as the psychology of human behavior has been increasingly informed by the sociology of human behavior. In a narrow sense, the psychology of human behavior can be seen as primarily concerned with individual actions and their origins and effects. The sociology of human behavior is instead more concerned with the context, with the socializing factors that are related

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to individual actions and that stimulate and shape or limit them (Herr, 1999). In the case of adult career development, which occupations and which work behaviors are most likely to be effected by the changes in the organization of work, its processes and its role expectations? Adult career development theory needs to address such issues as: How do individuals anticipate such changes, prepare themselves to be both secure and personally flexible in the face of change, and accept change as a challenge, not a threat?

4. An emerging theoretical issue is whether the construction of adult career development theory should rest primarily on psychological assumptions about the primacy of individual action or on interactional sociological, anthropological, organizational, or economic perspectives. The latter serve to clarify the contextual factors that shape or restrict individual action and create barriers and obstacles that must be understood and surmounted. They also reflect more directly the transactions between individual and environment that shape behavior.

As the context, as well as individual actions, become the focus of theories of adult career development, they broaden the interventions required to recognize that individuals engage in a constant array of adaptive interchanges with the multiple environments which they occupy. These include the family, community, institutional settings, governmental agencies, workplaces, and social policy. Each of these environments is potentially a target of career interventions designed to help facilitate adult career development. The broadening of concern for interventions that address both the individuals and the contexts they occupy, raises new questions about the types of information adults need and the mode of delivery, the uses of advanced technology (e.g., computer-assisted career guidance systems, the Internet) as primary career interventions, and the differing roles of counselors with individuals, groups, and social/economic environments (e.g., workplaces, schools, agencies) that can facilitate or thwart individual career development. Such perspectives affirm the need for the construction of a comprehensive matrix of interventions that are related to specific presenting problems, client characteristics, and settings. The purpose of such a matrix is to classify in accessible ways the science associated with adult career development in order to translate theory and research, what we know and its practical relevance, into systems of practice defined by categories of problems and the location of such problems, within the individual or in the environment.

5. To be successful in creating such a matrix of presenting problems x treatments/interventions x client characteristics x settings requires additional knowledge about populations that are not well represented in existing theory or research. For example, we have relatively few examples of research addressing the adult career development of poor persons, persons with a high school education or less, immigrant and domestic populations from different cultural backgrounds, Gay, Lesbian, and transgendered populations. Research about the career behavior and the "lived experiences" of persons in these populations needs significant attention if adult career development theory is to more fully reflect the differences in barriers,

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reinforcements, and other factors related to the career development of these subpopulations.

The need for increased attention to the variations in the career development of different sub-groups in the population may mean the need for more segmented theories rather than a theory or theories that are all-encompassing in their coverage. Segmented theories would focus more directly on the specific forms of obstacles, barriers, reinforcements, received messages, and other variables affecting the career behavior of women, racial and ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, persons of alternative sexual orientations, by level of education, socioeconomic level, and other indices (Herr, 1996). The results of such studies need to be compared to constructs already validated in existing career theory and reported in syntheses of career concepts that are well established (Herr, 1997; Savickas, 1999).

There also will need to be greater theoretical attention to the elements and the processes by which personal flexibility is achieved. Will this require new adaptations of human capital theory which emphasizes the "worker as investor" (Davenport, 1999). In such a context, the worker is in control of the "human capital" he or she possesses and can apply to different work settings, problems, or expectations. Human capital in this case means one's *ability* (knowledge, skill, talent), *behavior* (how we perform in contributing to a task), *effort* (the conscious application of our mental and physical resources to accomplish particular tasks, our work ethic), *time* (how much time are we willing to invest in a particular job), and what does the worker expect as a *return on investment* (e.g., intrinsic job fulfillment, opportunity for growth, recognition for accomplishments, financial rewards)? In such a paradigm, one can draw a parallel between the worker as an investor and the worker as a career manager. In the latter case, the task is to apply the human capital in those cases where the return on investment is expected to be appropriate. To remain flexible, however, the career manager also must be constantly improving and adding to his or her supply of human capital to make it more attractive to changing employers. To the degree one can engage in lifelong learning to improve one's human capital is in essence to be personally flexible. Such a perspective can also be considered in relation to motivation or to self-efficacy theory. The concept of motivation in industrial-organizational psychology as proposed by Lawler (1973) and in self-efficacy theory as originally proposed by Bandura (1977) essentially includes the same elements. Lawler's model of motivation is characterized by the equation (E?P) (P?O). Basically, such a framework indicates that the tendency to act in a certain way depends on the expectancy that the act will be followed by a given consequence (or outcome) and on the value or attractiveness of the consequence (or outcome) to the actor. Thus, there are two expectancies involved in motivation. The first, Effort?Performance, reflects the person's estimation of the probability that he or she can accomplish the tasks required in a particular job or other situation. The essential question is: Is the human capital I have to invest going to allow me to perform adequately in this situation? This is what Bandura (1977) and others such as Betz and Hackett (1986) refer to as self-efficacy, the beliefs one has that he or she can or can not perform a given behavior. The second dimension of motivation then is captured by the notation, Performance?Outcomes. Here the emphasis is on the subjective probability one has that if a particular performance can be achieved (if one's human capital is adequate), it will lead to certain desired outcomes (one will achieve the return on investment desired). In this segment of the motivation

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process, the issue is one's beliefs about what outcomes are valued. In this paradigm, the career manager engaged in reinforcing his or her personal flexibility would be concerned about enlarging one's possible performance and clarifying one's values and being able to apply them to a large range of potential work performance options and settings.

Obviously, there are many other possible ways to consider the substance and processes of achieving personal flexibility. However, the individual ability to adapt to change, to be able to reinvent oneself as necessary, to be personally flexible, will be critical to conceptions of adult career development in the future. Thus, such a concept deserves significant theoretical and research attention.

## Conclusion

The processes and conceptions of adult career development are likely to vary in different time periods, cross-generationally, and across nations. It is likely that in a world of economic systems and occupational structures in significant turbulence, the contexts in which career development is forged will be qualitatively different from those about which much adult career development theory has been formulated in the past. This chapter has attempted to identify some of the dynamic influences that will affect the nature and outcomes of adult career development. More specifically, this chapter has focused on areas in which theory development and research need further attention and refinement, has examined selected concepts (e.g., personal flexibility), and identified subpopulations (e.g., poor, immigrants, etc.) whose life experiences and career behavior must be more fully incorporated in adult career development theory.

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