

The Relationship between Theory, Research and Innovative Practice – Some notes responding to Professor Mark Savickas's paper

Audrey Collin

I should like to thank Professor Savickas for his thoughtful and rich analysis of the relationships between theory, research and practice. His exciting proposals for the development of a 'clinical science of career counselling' will, I am sure, have struck chords with many people. In many respects, they closely match the interests, activities and aspirations of many in the British career field, and in particular some of the new developments here, such as the Career Research Network, and the Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby.

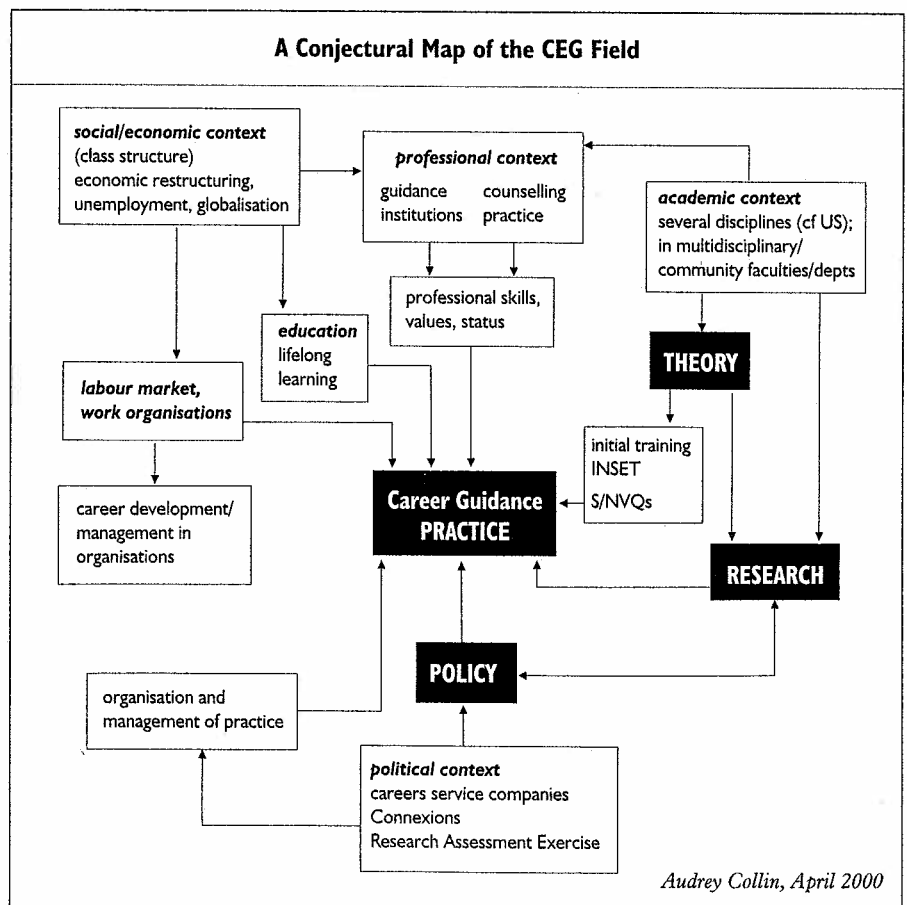
In exploring how we could take his proposals forward in meaningful ways, of course, we have to consider how compatible they would be with the character and needs of the field of career education and guidance (CEG) in Britain at this point in time. In North America, the discipline and institutions of psychology largely shape career theory and practice, giving them a degree of coherence and shared identity – perhaps even clout. Here, not only do we have few 'home-grown' major theories of career, but they draw upon several disciplines. This eclecticism may reflect the historical development of CEG here, but it creates a sense of fragmentation in the thinking about, and application of, theory in research and practice. Moreover, the British culture generally seems to have an anti-academic bias. Another characteristic of British CEG is shared with the North American: it operates largely in isolation from the practice and practitioners of career

development and management in work organisations. The 1998 NICEC/CRAC consultation on Developing a Research Culture in Career Education and Guidance spelt out some of those characteristics of the field. To those I think we now also need to add others. The CEG field has experienced – and is again facing – considerable, perceived-as-threatening change to its internal and external boundaries and core tasks. Hence, there is increasing consideration being given in our research and literature to (government) policy in attempts to map or predict its outcomes, and (possibly) influence its direction.

To achieve innovative practice, then, I suggest that we have to take these characteristics of our field into consideration. Moreover, I suggest that we need to consider them not piecemeal but as a systemic whole. This is what I have tried to do in the accompanying map of the field. The development of a 'clinical science' would both call for and initiate changes throughout the system as a whole.

When looking at this map, it is evident that CEG practitioners have to negotiate several – and often conflicting – discourses, a task for which they may have been largely unprepared in initial training:

- an academic discourse – decontextualised and abstract knowledge;
- a professional discourse – knowledge, skills, values; client-centred practice;
- a managerial discourse – relevance, performance, value for money.



These discourses reflect not just different language communities, but different goals and values. Recognising this, it is salutary to enquire what 'career' means to these different communities. Is it anything more than a rhetoric concerning the relationship between individual, organisation, and society? What, then is 'career guidance'? What difference does it make, to whom and for whom? Whose purposes does it serve?

What are the implications for research and innovative practice of this acknowledgement of the discourses and rhetorics of the career field? I work in management education, in which similar discourses and dilemmas are not unknown. Managers are often recommended to distinguish between efficiency and effectiveness – doing things right and doing the right things (questioning existing purposes and norms). Efficiency is clearly essential, particularly perhaps in the short term, but we must not ignore the crucial need to challenge whether what we are doing is effective. It is not just a matter of whether we are going about things in the most efficient way, but whether we are effective, whether what we are trying to achieve – our goals and values – is still appropriate and desirable, particularly when contexts are changing. Very often, rhetoric disguises the insufficiency of efficiency, leaving us to be drawn along by contextual changes that we have not recognised or challenged.

I would strongly argue that, in exploring ways forward, we need to consider whether our existing theory, research and practice are efficient and effective, and ensure that whatever is proposed for the future will be both efficient and effective. Given the present political and organisational context of CEG, there could be some danger that clinical research leads to innovative practice that is efficient, but not effective.

Hence, to sharpen our focus on the needs of the British field of CEG, my response to Professor Savickas's paper is to ask us to consider the following questions as we debate his proposals:

- Do we currently have appropriate theories that would underpin clinical research? Are the theories currently used in guidance efficient in addressing the current, and changing, social and economic context, and the implications of it for individuals? Are they effective in challenging old, and offering new, ways of understanding?
- If not, how should we set about stimulating new theory development – not just to inform practice in the short-term, but to explain the long-term changes in society and their implications for individuals? Who should do this?
- How can we ensure that clinical research would be both efficient and effective? How can we develop independent long-term research? Where would it take place, and who would do it?
- Are practitioners ready for their part in effective clinical research? Have they the appropriate orientation and skills – and resources?
- Has their training prepared them to recognise, deconstruct, and negotiate the discourses that construct their practice? Should initial and in-service training focus on challenging their assumptions and developing their critical thinking? (This could be done in part by examining the different perspectives of theorists and different methodologies of researchers.)
- Could greater synergy across the field be achieved by eradicating the existing boundary between CEG and organisational career theory and practice? How could we set about this?
- Is there any way in which we could seize the opportunity afforded by the new wave of change that is about to break to rethink our goals and position, so that we could truly 'make a difference'?

Notes

To help me identify something of the complexity of the British field so that I could respond to Professor Savickas's paper, I consulted with a number of people who have informed and varying perspectives upon the field. They are named below. I wish to thank them and acknowledge their help in informing me, challenging me, and clarifying my thinking. Nevertheless, they are absolved from the responsibility for the interpretations I have made here!

Jane Artess, Manchester Metropolitan University;
 Jenny Bimrose, University of East London;
 Iwan Griffiths, De Montfort University Careers Service;
 Bill Gothard, University of Reading;
 Ruth Hawthorn, Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge;
 Phil Hodgkinson, University of Leeds;
 Deirdre Hughes, Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby;
 Migel Jayasinghe, Royal British Legion Industries;
 Jenny Kidd, Birkbeck College, University of London;
 John Killeen, University of Hertfordshire;
 Bill Law, NICEC;
 Allister McGowan, Hertfordshire Careers Services Ltd;
 Hazel Reid, The College of Guidance Studies;
 Sheila Semple, University of Strathclyde.

For correspondence:

Audrey Collin, Professor of Career Studies, De Montfort University,
 acollin@dmu.ac.uk