

Scientific and Everyday Understanding of the Notion of Career

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Abstract: Career guidance has to be grounded on viable theories and concepts consistent with one's experiences to enable people (counsellors as well as clients) to make predictions about their career. Therefore, development of viable theories and concepts has to be a two-way process, including theoretical studies and investigation of individuals' experience in real life activities. The aim of the study was to get insight into scientific and everyday understanding of the notion of career. Several career theories and career concepts were briefly analysed. To find out the words and phrases people would use to define the notion of career, the empirical part of the research was provided. The participants were asked to define notions of career and successful career by completing sentences *Career is...* and *Successful career is...* Words, phrases and sentences were categorized into twelve categories: 'work', 'satisfaction', 'self-regulation', 'sequence', 'earnings', 'personal development', 'results', 'external evaluation', 'suitability', 'lifelong process', 'entrepreneurship', and 'interaction'. The categories which were used more often by the respondents to describe the notion of career were as follows: 'work', 'satisfaction', 'self-regulation', 'sequence', and 'earnings'. The participants used categories from 1 to 8 to describe their careers. Differences in the number of categories among the status subgroups are statistically significant; differences in the number of categories among the subgroups of gender are not statistically significant. Younger participants use more categories in their definitions of career and successful career.

Keywords: career, individual human potential, work, career education.

Introduction

Seven years ago the Life Design International Research Group questioned functionality of current career development theories and techniques (Savickas, Nota, 2009). This problem is also topical at present.

In the rapidly changing world lifelong career guidance becomes an everyday reality; therefore advice and support in this area have to be grounded on viable theories and concepts. Viable theories and concepts are mental constructs that have to satisfy the constraints of reality, i.e., they have to be consistent with one's experiences and able to fulfil an intended purpose (e.g., to enable people to make predictions about certain phenomena). (Hardy, Taylor, 1997; von Glasersfeld, 1984). According to W. Patton (2008, 133), "career theories need to be appropriate for the complexity of individuals living in a complex world". Therefore development of viable theories and concepts has to be a two-way process, including theoretical studies and investigation of individuals' experience in real life activities.

This determines the course and the structure of this study. Firstly, the most important career aspects (dimensions) of career theories will be given. Secondly, the understanding of career notion based on real life experience of different subgroups of respondents will be studied.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the most important dimensions (aspects) of the contemporary concept of career?
2. Which are the most frequently used categories to characterize the notion of career?
3. Are there any statistically significant differences in the usage of categories between genders and among different subgroups of respondents?

Methodology

To achieve the aim of the research several career theories and career concepts were briefly analysed. General scientific methods such as analysis and synthesis, induction, deduction, and analogy were used

in the research. To find out the words and phrases people would use more often to describe notions of career, the empirical part of the research was provided.

There were 99 participants from the Latvian rural secondary schools, 50 boys and 49 girls, 13 to 17 years of age ($M_{\text{age}} = 14.76$, $SD = 0.65$), 63 female and 24 male 1st year students from the Latvia University of Agriculture (LUA), 18 to 22 years of age ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.10$, $SD = 0.68$), and 108 unemployed persons registered with the State Employment Agency, 77 females and 31 males, 26 to 59 years of age ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.97$, $SD = 10.90$). There was a proportionate number of respondents in status subgroups ($\chi^2 = 2.26$, $p = 0.32$); a number of respondents in gender subgroups was not proportionate ($\chi^2 = 24$, $p < 0.01$) as 2/3 of respondents were females. Analogous disproportions were found in the group of unemployed persons (2/3 of respondents were females) and in the group of university students (3/4 of respondents were females). In the subgroup of secondary school students, the number of male and female respondents was approximately equal.

The participants were asked to specify their gender and age and to define notions of *career* and *successful career* by completing sentences *Career is...* and *Successful career is....*, printed on a A6 worksheet.

The worksheets were handed out to the participants who after filling them out personally returned them back to the researcher. The worksheets were filled out in the classrooms, and in the waiting rooms of the State Employment Agency (Riga and Aizkraukle Branch Offices).

Definitions of career and successful career were content-coded together, coding units (words, phrases or sentences) were categorized into one of twelve domains (categories): *work* (such units as 'occupation', 'job', 'working', 'profession', 'trade', etc.), *satisfaction* (e.g., 'satisfaction', 'joy', 'pleasure', etc.), *self-regulation* ('purpose', 'intention', 'purposeful choice', 'setting and attainment of personal goals', etc.), *sequence* ('sequence', 'succession', 'career ladder', 'gradually', etc.), *earnings* ('wages', 'gain', 'salary', 'money', etc.), *personal development* ('improve myself (yourself)', 'gaining knowledge', 'learn new skills', etc.), *results* ('achievement', 'success', 'objective results', 'outcomes', 'performance', etc.), *external evaluation* ('advancement', 'promotion', 'respect', 'regard', 'admiration', etc.), *suitability* ('fitness', 'be able to do well what must be done', 'competent', 'capable to perform', etc.), *lifelong process* ('it begins in childhood', 'during working age and later', 'it continues throughout life', etc.), *entrepreneurship* ('business', 'own business', 'to manage', 'self-employed', 'boss', etc.), and *interaction* ('balance of life domains', 'family support', 'cooperation', etc.). The aim of the research was to find out categories (not to count units in each category); a category was mentioned if at least one coding unit fell in the category.

Data coding was carried out by an independent researcher not involved in and not informed about the aims of the research.

To find out the proportion of categories, the number and relative frequencies of each category were calculated in the whole group and separately in male and female subgroups, students' subgroups (secondary school and university) and the subgroup of unemployed.

R 3.2.3 and MS Excel 2013 were used to process the research data.

The descriptive statistics indicators (Mean (M), Standard Deviation (SD), Median, Quartiles, and Range) were calculated. The non-parametric criteria – Spearman's rank correlation (r_{Sp}) and Pearson Chi-squares (χ^2) were calculated analysing differences of distribution among the subgroups.

Results and discussion

While carrying out the theoretical analysis of the scientific literature on career development, it was found out that early career theories, influenced by the logical positivist worldview, were focused on the *content of career choice* and on the *fit between person and environment*. Developmental theories described the *process* and *stages* of career development. Later, cognitive and social cognitive theories put emphasis on cognitive processes in career development; particular theories were focused on career contexts. More recently, constructivist researchers have focused on career *self-regulation* (e.g., *career self-management*) and *career self-construction* (Patton, 2008).

New theories and conceptions are built on the basis of previous ones; development of theories and conceptions is a sequential process where dominant theories and conceptions of a prior era never completely disappear, they are transformed and integrated in new theories and conceptions. Therefore definitions of career and successful career also are changed gradually. During the last century “an old-style classical approach to careers focused on external measures, such as *status* and *financial reward*”, nowadays internal dimensions of career – “how a person sees the development of their own career in terms of inner *values, goals, and aspirations*” become more explicit (Baruch, 2004, 43, 74).

Career more often was defined as a work-related activity (e.g., “the pattern of work-related experience” (Greenhaus, Callanan, 2010, 10), “an evolving sequence of a person’s work experience over time” (Arthur, 2008, 166), “the sequence of employment-related positions, roles, activities and experiences” (Bosley, Arnold, 2009, 1493), or at least as an “interaction between work, learning and privacy” (Izglītības likums, 1998). Career is also defined as *a sequence of job opportunities* (DeFillippi, Arthur, 1996, 116) and as *the totality of work - paid and unpaid - one does in his/her lifetime* (Sears, 1982, 138). Career is a work-related process, whenever the social organisation of work changes, career theories and conceptions have to be improved (Savickas, 2008).

Relationship between work and career seems ambiguous in the above definitions. I agree with J. DesJardins (2013, 103) that “a career signifies the development of a relationship between the self and the activity of work” because “individuals and work exist in a reciprocal relationship”, and “the work is the primary activity through which people develop their full potential” (DesJardins 2016, 429-430). If career is a work-related activity and the work is an activity where individual human potential develops, the notions of individual human potential and development of this potential are the key concepts to understand career and career development.

Based on the findings of O. Ivanov (Иванов, 2012), I define individual human potential as an aggregate of systems of individual’s general and specific needs and competences created in interaction with social environment to carry out personally and socially meaningful activities, main social roles and functions. The activity is a necessary condition to fulfil individual human potential, therefore individuals have to search for suitable activities to fulfil (use and develop) human potential, usage and development are two inseparable parts to fulfil individual human potential.

According to the definition, human potential has to be multidimensional and multicomponent; dimensions and components of individual human potential depend on the system of individual's activities where individual human potential is fulfilled (individual’s life-activity). For example, J.Reznik suggests the professional (or vocational), communicative, cognitive, spiritual and reproductive potentials as the main components of individual human potential (Резник, 2007), Т.Zaslavskaya considers sociodemographic, socioeconomic, sociocultural and activity potentials as four interconnected, relatively independent components of human potential (Заславская, 2005). Based on the findings of O.Ivanov, D. Leontiev, J.Reznik, Т. Zaslavskaya, E.Deci and R.Руан (Иванов, 2012; Леонтьев, 2011; Резник, 2007; Заславская, 2005; Deci, Руан, 2012), I conclude that the three main interconnected, relatively independent components (subsystems) of individual human potential are as follows: *potential of particular activity*, *social potential* and *potential for self-regulation*; potential of particular activity related to the basic psychological need for competence is a necessary condition to carry out a particular activity, social potential related to the need for relatedness to others is a necessary condition to create a socially meaningful activity, potential for self-regulation related to the need for autonomy is a necessary condition to form a personally meaningful activity. Individual human potential can be fulfilled only if all components (*potential of particular activity, social potential and potential for self-regulation*) are fulfilled; therefore individuals have to search for activities which are sufficient to meet *all* basic psychological needs (Deci, Руан, 2012) and to fulfil *all* components of individual human potential.

Therefore I broadly define career as fulfilment (usage and development) of human potential. My understanding of career paths, career success, career self-management and career guidance is based on the previous assumption. An individual career path is really individual, it depends on the way how the content of each component (needs and competences) is fulfilled (used and developed). According to the definition, career constantly is career *in* a particular activity, e.g., career in sports, career in politics, etc.

Individuals fulfil their potentials in social activities (Иванов, 2012); consequently criteria of career success have to be twofold – social and individual. In successful career individual fulfils his/her human potential and at the same time contributes to sustainability of society (community, institutions, groups, and individuals). The above has to have a focus also on career self-management and especially on career guidance because society (organizations, institutions, groups, individuals) has to be interested in the way individual fulfils his/her potential. These ways may be prosocial or asocial, useful or harmful, and the role of career guidance (especially of career education) is to contribute to the first one and to impede the second.

Individuals choose work activities to fulfil their human potential and work roles undertaken by an individual to “enable or impede fulfilment of human potential” (Jackson, Leon, 2010). If “the work is the primary activity through which people develop their full potential” (DesJardins 2016, 429), the primary type of career has to be career-in-work.

It is necessary to clarify the definition of work. Work is “sustained, conscious paid and/or unpaid effort <...> aimed at producing societally acceptable benefits for oneself and/or for oneself and others” (NCDA, 2008), broadly - any general activity requiring perseverance, diligence, and concentration (DesJardins, 2016, 429). “Socially acceptable benefits” may be both material and mental, nowadays the knowledge work, utilization of intellectual potential or “intellectual capital to create, teach and solve problems” (Norden, 2006, 449) becomes more and more important.

Obviously, nowadays the work and learning become inseparable, expression “*mācību darbs*” (literally - learning work, in Latvian) is an appropriate characterization of contemporary society. The concept of work expands, so the notion of work includes not only employment, but also learning and leisure time activities where socially accepted material and mental benefits for oneself and/or for oneself and others are created during relatively sustained, conscious paid and/or unpaid effort.

So the notion of primary career (career-in-work) has to include fulfilment of human potential not only in employment, but also in all situations where an individual works (creates socially accepted material and mental benefits for oneself and/or for oneself and others).

It can be concluded that career as fulfilment of human potential in work has personal and social dimensions, it is performed and managed by an individual in cooperation with society (organizations, institutions, groups, individuals), it is successful provided individual human potential is fulfilled in the way which contributes to sustainability of society (community, institutions, groups, individuals) at the same time. Achievements at work and career success are not the same, e.g., high achievements at work may be associated with unsuccessful career in case individual human potential is not fulfilled (e.g., is only used but not developed) in this kind of work and vice versa.

To compare the above conclusions and the understanding of the notions of career and successful career among different groups of population, the empirical part of the research was provided.

Table 1

Statistical indicators	Number of categories mentioned in the subgroups					
	Unemployed, n =108	Students (university), n = 87	Students (secondary school), n = 99	Male, n=105	Female, n=189	Sample, n=294
Median	3	4	4	3	4	3.5
Min value	1	1	2	1	1	1
Max value	6	8	6	6	8	8
1st Quartile	2	3	3	3	3	3
3rd Quartile	4	5	4	4	4	4
Range	5	7	4	5	7	7

To find out the proportion of categories, the number, relative frequencies and statistical indicators for each category were calculated in the whole group and separately in male and female subgroups, students' subgroups (secondary school and university) and the subgroup of unemployed. The number of

categories (Table 1) differs among the status subgroups, difference is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 38.09$, $p < 0.01$). Statistically significant difference is not found among the subgroups of gender ($\chi^2 = 7.78$, $p = 0.25$).

Statistically significant negative weak correlation was found between the participants' age and the number of categories ($r_{sp} = -0.19$; $p < 0.01$), it means that younger participants use more categories (wider lexicon) to describe career and successful career.

To explain the notion of career, coding units from category 'work' were used by more than 4/5 participants (Table 2). Half as many participants used words or phrases that match such categories as "satisfaction", "self-regulation", and "sequence".

Table 2

Respondents which used coding units from particular category (subgroups of gender)

Category	Subgroup	Frequency		χ^2	p-value
		n	%		
Work	Male, n = 105	86	82	0.54	0.46
	Female, n= 189	161	85		
Satisfaction	Male, n = 105	37	35	2.64	0.10
	Female, n= 189	85	45		
Self-regulation	Male, n = 105	38	36	1.06	0.30
	Female, n= 189	80	42		
Sequence	Male, n = 105	37	35	0.71	0.40
	Female, n= 189	76	40		
Earnings	Male, n = 105	33	31	0.77	0.38
	Female, n= 189	69	37		
Personal development	Male, n = 105	27	26	0.06	0.81
	Female, n= 189	51	27		
Results	Male, n = 105	20	19	0.88	0.35
	Female, n= 189	45	24		
External evaluation	Male, n = 105	19	18	0.01	0.93
	Female, n= 189	35	19		
Suitability	Male, n = 105	12	11	2.20	0.14
	Female, n= 189	34	18		
Lifelong process	Male, n = 105	16	15	1.73	0.19
	Female, n= 189	19	10		
Entrepreneurship	Male, n = 105	14	13	0.32	0.57
	Female, n= 189	21	11		
Interaction	Male, n = 105	12	11	0.69	0.41
	Female, n= 189	16	8		

When comparing the number of participants which used particular categories, statistically significant differences were found among the subgroups of status (Table 3). More than 9/10 secondary school students used work-related words or phrases to describe career, the proportion is lower in the groups of unemployed and university students ($\chi^2 = 7.84$, $p = 0.02$). Only 1/5 of unemployed participants used the category "satisfaction" to describe the notion of career, the proportion is at least twice as high in the groups of students ($\chi^2 = 33.59$, $p < 0.01$). Only 1/4 of secondary school students used words and phrases from the category "sequence" to describe notions of career and successful career, the proportion is almost twice as high in the groups of unemployed and university students ($\chi^2 = 11.10$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 3

Respondents which used coding units from particular category (subgroups of status)

Category	Subgroup	Frequency		χ^2	p-value
		n	%		
Work	unemployed, n= 108	84	78	7.84	0.02
	students (university), n= 87	72	83		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	91	92		
Satisfaction	unemployed, n= 108	24	22	33.59	< 0.01
	students (university), n= 87	55	63		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	43	43		
Self-regulation	unemployed, n= 108	34	31	5.98	0.05
	students (university), n= 87	42	48		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	42	42		
Sequence	unemployed, n= 108	50	46	11.10	< 0.01
	students (university), n= 87	38	44		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	25	25		
Earnings	unemployed, n= 108	36	33	0.14	0.93
	students (university), n= 87	31	36		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	35	35		
Personal development	unemployed, n= 108	36	33	6.44	0.04
	students (university), n= 87	15	17		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	27	27		
Results	unemployed, n= 108	14	13	14.69	< 0.01
	students (university), n= 87	31	36		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	20	20		
External evaluation	unemployed, n= 108	20	19	0.01	0.99
	students (university), n= 87	16	18		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	18	18		
Suitability	unemployed, n= 108	14	13	3.51	0.17
	students (university), n= 87	11	13		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	21	21		
Lifelong process	unemployed, n= 108	6	6	15.44	< 0.01
	students (university), n= 87	7	8		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	22	22		
Entrepreneurship	unemployed, n= 108	4	4	12.24	< 0.01
	students (university), n= 87	17	20		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	14	14		
Interaction	unemployed, n= 108	13	12	5.23	0.07
	students (university), n= 87	11	13		
	students (secondary school), n = 99	4	4		

Statistically significant differences were found also in the usage of words and phrases from the categories 'personal development' and 'results'. A small amount of university students (less than 1/5 of respondents) used units from the category 'personal development' to describe notions of career or successful career, the proportion is almost twice as high in the groups of unemployed and secondary school students ($\chi^2 = 6.44$, $p=0.04$). Less than 1/6 of unemployed respondents used the units from the category 'results', the proportion is higher in the groups of students ($\chi^2 = 14.69$, $p < 0.01$). Four

unemployed participants used coding units from the category “entrepreneurship” in their definitions of career, the proportion is at least three times higher in the groups of students ($\chi^2 = 12.24$, $p < 0.01$). Approximately 1/5 of secondary school students used words from the category “lifelong process” to describe the notion of career, the proportion is almost three times lower in the groups of unemployed and university students ($\chi^2 = 15.44$, $p < 0.01$).

When comparing distribution of the relative frequencies of categories in subgroups of gender and status, it was found out that differences were not statistically significant (Table 4).

Table 4

Relative Frequencies of Categories						
Category	Unemployed, n=108	Students (university), n = 87	Students (secondary school), n = 99	Male, n=105	Female, n=189	Sample, n=294
Work	0,25	0,25	0,21	0,25	0,23	0,24
Satisfaction	0,07	0,12	0,16	0,11	0,12	0,12
Self-regulation	0,10	0,12	0,12	0,11	0,12	0,11
Sequence	0,15	0,07	0,11	0,11	0,11	0,11
Earnings	0,11	0,10	0,09	0,09	0,10	0,10
Personal development	0,11	0,07	0,04	0,08	0,07	0,07
Results	0,04	0,06	0,09	0,06	0,07	0,06
External evaluation	0,06	0,05	0,05	0,05	0,05	0,05
Suitability	0,04	0,06	0,03	0,03	0,05	0,04
Lifelong process	0,02	0,06	0,02	0,05	0,03	0,03
Entrepreneurship	0,01	0,04	0,05	0,04	0,03	0,03
Interaction	0,04	0,01	0,03	0,03	0,02	0,03

Conclusions

Based on the results of the study, the following conclusions were made:

- the most important dimensions (aspects) of the contemporary concept of career are work and fulfilment of individual human potential;
- the categories which were used more often by the respondents to describe the notion of career were as follows ‘work’, ‘satisfaction’, ‘self-regulation’, ‘sequence’, and ‘earnings’;
- participants use categories from 1 to 8 to describe their careers; differences in the number of categories among the status subgroups are statistically significant; differences in the number of categories among the subgroups of gender are not statistically significant; younger participants use more categories (wider lexicon) in their definitions of career and successful career;
- there are no statistically significant differences in the usage of words and phrases from elicited categories between the genders; statistically significant differences were found in the usage of words and phrases from such categories as ‘work’, ‘satisfaction’, ‘sequence’, ‘personal development’, ‘results’, ‘lifelong process’, and ‘entrepreneurship’ among different subgroups of respondents.

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