



Career as social and professional representations

Recent theoretical contributions at Veiledersforum indicate a need to explore and add new theoretical perspectives to career guidance. Ingela Bergmo Prvulovic presents a framework for understanding these needs by addressing conflicting perspectives on career, why these increasingly collide and why learning is increasingly on the agenda.

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Editorial

Why does there seem to be an increasing need to explore and add new theoretical perspectives to career guidance practice and research? And why is it that learning appears to be gaining increased attention in this field? Recent theoretical contributions at Veiledersforum.no (see Anna Bilon-Piorko, Jenny Bimrose, Christer Langström and Anouk Jasmin-Albien) indicate that the field is undergoing a theoretical transformation. Below, Ingela Bergmo Prvulovic (guest editor of the 2021 published articles of theoretical contributions) presents her framework on career as social and professional representations, to further our understanding of this emerging need and why learning is increasingly on the agenda.

Classical theories and new emerging frameworks

Career guidance constitutes a field of practice and research that has historically centred around several robust theories. The 'big five' of these, as described by S. Alvin Leung, are integrated as classics into most education programmes for career guidance and counselling and are thus familiar among many practitioners.

While all of these theories continue to serve the field of practice and research, many were developed at a time when working life conditions were markedly different than those of today. Moreover, as noted by S. Alvin Leung, these models were developed by scholars in the United States; scholars in the European context seem to be paying increased attention to the complexity that arises in practice in times of change and are thus developing new theoretical frameworks.

Guidance practitioners and researchers thus need to continuously reflect and revisit their theoretical frames, especially in cases where their previous theoretical point of departure seems insufficient—not providing support in practice or in explaining the complex dilemmas linked with people’s careers today.

New meanings of career

There are several reasons for this. First, the core aim of career guidance concerns the very concept and social phenomenon of *career*. As noted by Bergmo-Prvulovic (2015) and Sherry E. Sullivan and Yehuda Baruch (2009), the concept of career has undergone tremendous change along with the changing world of work. New meanings and ways of speaking about career in contemporary society, exemplified through new rhetoric modifiers that put emphasis on flexibility, continuous competence increase, lifelong learning strategies as adjustment to change along with individual responsibility, have gradually been introduced by researchers in different fields, and further implemented via policy documents.

Such changes exemplify aims at reshaping the labour force’s expectations and behaviour, from viewing career based on the traditional image of ‘climbing the ladder’ towards embracing ideas of career defined by protean and boundaryless concepts—which exemplify an introduction of new employment principles and new employer–employee-relationships, as noted by Cherlyn S. Granrose and Patricia A. Baccili.

However, as highlighted in social representations theory (SRT; see for instance writings by Serge Moscovici, Ivana Markova and Sandra Jovchelovitch), people’s prior presupposed everyday knowledge on certain social phenomena do not stop it from existing in their minds, even once new meanings are introduced or communicated by a dominant segment of society. Different knowledge bases that are socially and communicatively formed within certain groups and fields continue to exist for a long time, side by side, may be contrast each other, and thus exist in a process of recurrent dynamic negotiation.

Multidirectional careers lead to new challenges

Second, career guidance has long been institutionally organized with a primary focus on the *career choice and decision-making process*. This is especially true within school systems, with regards to supporting youth in choosing educational and vocational career paths. Nevertheless, this way of institutionally offering guidance support in choice and decision-making processes has been characterized by linear thinking about the career track, in which peoples’ trajectories are characterized as a simplified three-step journey:

from education to work and then to retirement. This view has influenced institutional organization regarding where career support is offered.

However, as noted by Baruch (2004), Bergmo-Prvulovic (2021), Gabriela Topa and Carlos-Maria Alcover and Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott, careers of today are more multidirectional than linear. People move from education to work and back again. They also move within their working life and make several transitions within their life stages and between different sectors. They can move towards retirement, retire, and then move back to occupational or educational settings. People can study and work at the same time. These multidirectional careers lead to new challenges, requiring attention to a third explanation for the field's apparent need for theoretical development and/or transformation.

Previously distinct fields are increasingly intertwined

Third, what used to be seen as distinct fields—and was thus handled separately within different fields of practice—is increasingly becoming intertwined because of people's more frequent career movements between those fields. Where different aspects of career were focused on within career guidance activities in school systems, upon entering the labour market, and within organizations and working life, career is now a shared object of interest across fields or practice (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2015; 2018; 2020).

Career from a metatheoretical perspective

Abstract, social phenomena, such as career, requires a metatheoretical approach that enables us to explain and clarify the complexity that arises both on an individual level and in career guidance support sessions.

We can study career from a different metatheoretical perspective than those commonly used in the field (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2015). Based on SRT, originally formulated by Serge Moscovici in 1961, *career* is thus identified as such an abstract, social phenomenon (see Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2015) about which people have formed social knowledge, acquiring a kind of taken-for-granted knowledge about what career *is*.

SRT concerns how we shape social knowledge about a certain object, where social representations are considered to be specific ways of understanding and communicating what we already know. According to Mohamed Chaib and Birgitta Orfali, SRT explains how we shape our collective understanding—our everyday, common-sense knowledge—about reality. Social representations do not necessarily express directly experienced phenomena; indeed, people may hold representations of different phenomena without having experienced them themselves. This is also the case with *career*.

Moscovici (1973) explains social representations from a dynamic point of view, as a network of ideas, metaphors and images defined as

a system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable

communication to take place among members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual group history. (p. xiii).

Career as social and professional representations

Based upon studies applying and further developing the theoretical and analytical framework in which career is understood and explored as underlying social and professional representations that precedes communicative actions (see Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2015a; 2015b; 2018), the meaning of *career* becomes different depending on each groups' role and function in society. Career, as it is communicated from a governance strategic perspective, through policy documents focusing on strategies to manage education and labour market challenges, becomes a means for achieving overall organizational goals and business needs.

However, career, as it is communicated and understood within the career guidance community, becomes a means for personal growth and life development, which indirectly implies a learning perspective on career. Career, among people with experience from a changing working life, entails an exchange perspective, in which career becomes a *game of exchange*, involving the belief that individual efforts should result in certain outcomes and rewards.

Bergmo-Prvulovic and Åsa Hirsh's empirical study based on this framework reveal an interplay between expected internally experienced rewards, such as experiencing meaningfulness and feeling appreciated, and external rewards observable by others. The view of career as an exchange is clearly rooted in the normative employee-employer relationship, and further relates to aspects of the psychological contract, explained as an exchange relationship by Lynn MacFarlane Shore and Lois E. Tetrick.

However, aspects of this exchange relationship have been challenged by new ways of speaking about career, and by trends emphasizing individual responsibility for designing one's own career. The shared responsibility for the social phenomena of career and the mutuality in the exchange-relationship are also at risk when new ways of practicing this relationship are introduced in the world of work (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2018).

Why do we shape social representations?

The purpose of all representations is to make something unfamiliar familiar. Different groups shape the familiarity of a certain object, through the social and communicative production of knowledge, and they shape systems of values, ideas and practices regarding what the object is about and how this object should be understood—i.e., what meaning is ascribed to this object within a given group.

As emphasized in SRT, knowledge is commonly shaped among groups sharing a specific context (see for instance writings by Denise Jodelet, Sandra Jovchelovitch, and Ivana

Markova). A given group, or professional community, may share *knowledge-based representations* (these involve transformed scientific or experienced-based knowledge) and professionally shaped representations, explained by Pierre Ratinaud and Michel Lac as a representational process towards the shaping of professional identities. In addition, communication plays a specific and influential role in the shaping and maintenance of social representations, exemplified through the key mental processes of anchoring and objectifying—as well as in the change of social representations.

The role of change—when presupposed knowledge is challenged and renegotiated

According to Moscovici (2001), social representations become particularly vivid in times of change. As empirically illustrated (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2015), the role of change thus plays a key role when presupposed knowledge of career becomes challenged. Today's world of work increasingly requires handling increasingly colliding perspectives on career; these are rooted in differently shaped value systems underlying groups' communication about career, depending on the purpose, role and function each group represents (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2018, 2020). These collisions can be explained by people's increased multidirectional career movements between sectors and institutions that earlier were handled separately within each sector, as highlighted by Bergmo-Prvulovic (2020).

Consequently, peoples' presupposed knowledge needs to be continuously revisited and critically reflected upon when different situations, groups or contexts with another knowledge base than their own challenge their presupposed knowledge, and suddenly require them to understand something differently. When presupposed knowledge of career among people—and different groups of people becomes challenged—as different knowledge bases increasingly collide, people need to become aware of what it *is* that is colliding and find strategies to handle these tensions. Guidance professionals, too, are experiencing tension between their own knowledge base regarding what career is or should be and must learn how to navigate this.

Why is learning increasingly on the agenda within the career guidance field?

There are several reasons why learning is increasingly on the agenda in the field of career guidance and counselling. However, the content of that learning largely depends on the perspective being emphasized.

The need for learning is often communicated as a necessity for organizations to maintain their—and their employees'—readiness for change and thus maintain their competitiveness. However, the need for learning that emerges from the exploration of career as social and professional representations highlights the importance of attending to the *learner*: i.e., the individual's need for support in their own existential, experience-based and transformative learning processes that seem increasingly needed in a changing society. Career guidance may offer a space for such learning support.

Increased attention on the complexity of people's learning processes throughout a transition—i.e., the process of leaving a context and integrating into and embracing a

new one—moves beyond the traditional focus on career choice and decision-making processes (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2022). People’s increasing multidirectional career movements also result in increasing knowledge-base collisions and shifting perspectives (including their own presupposed knowledge) concerning career, what a career should entail and the expected results of a career choice.

Furthermore, they need to be supported in critical reflection and awareness about different perspectives, and encouraged to explore existing knowledge bases on career; this will help them find strategies to navigate towards, and through, new contexts in which other (potentially colliding) perspectives on career may underly the practices and strategies they encounter.

Conclusion—a need for learning

The need for learning is not only an issue for people struggling with changing conditions throughout their career movements; it is also salient for career guidance practitioners and researchers, as they too must revisit their own presupposed views on how career is understood within their own professional context and is socially shaped within their professional community.

Furthermore, practitioners and researchers may benefit from exploring underlying representations of career in other contexts, and how these shape reality in different groups. A deeper understanding of how the meaning of career is differently shaped in different professional groups or contexts would also further support clients in their navigating towards new professional contexts.

The ‘big five’ theories described by S. Alvin Leung are:

- (a) the Theory of Work Adjustment by Dawis and Lofquist
- (b) Holland’s theory of vocational personalities in work environment
- (c) the self-concept theory of career development formulated by Super and more recently by Savickas
- (d) Gottfredson’s Theory of Circumscription and Compromise
- (e) social cognitive career theory by Lent Brown and Hackett

Anchoring: This mental process explains how people anchor ideas and reduce them to categories and images, to make them fit into a familiar context.

Objectifying: This mental process explains how people objectify ideas by transforming them into something concrete.

As exemplified in empirical research, (see Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2015b), career guidance counsellors anchor their professional identity in formulations deriving from ethical declarations.

Biography

Ingela Bergmo-Prvulovic is Associate Professor at the School of Education and Communication in Jönköping University, Sweden, and affiliated with the Swedish National Centre for Lifelong Learning.

Her research addresses the relationship between the governance of education and labour market strategies along with changes in the world of work, people's multidirectional careers and learning throughout life; she also studies the influences social change bring to career-supportive professions and practice, as well as other professions' transforming careers, as influenced by societal change.

Bergmo-Prvulovic uses SRT as a metatheoretical base in several studies and research projects, from which she has developed a theoretical analytical framework of understanding career as social and professional representations, empirically applied in several studies.

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