
Integrating Action Theory and Human Agency In Career Development

Charles P. Chen

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT)

ABSTRACT

This article proposes the integration of action theory and the notion of human agency in life and career. A review of the theoretical and research background of the two perspectives forms a conceptual basis for discussion and analysis. The article then compares some aspects of the two perspectives, recognizing variation while focusing more on the common conceptual ground they share. Career counselling implications are provided with the goal of enhancing persons' action orientation and agentic functioning in their life career development.

RÉSUMÉ

L'objectif de cet article est d'étudier le processus d'appropriation et de réalisation d'un projet de carrière à la lumière de la théorie de l'action. Une revue des fondements théoriques et empiriques de la théorie de l'action et de la notion de « pouvoir humain » (« *human agency* ») est proposée comme base de discussion et d'analyse. L'article compare ces deux perspectives et souligne l'importance de leurs fondements conceptuels communs, tout en identifiant certaines dissemblances. Des implications sur le plan de la pratique professionnelle en counseling et orientation sont dégagées.

The goal of this paper is to discuss and analyze the correlation between two theoretical perspectives, namely, action theory and the notion of human agency, in a life career development context. With philosophical roots in social constructionism, both perspectives appear to have contributed to forming the emerging theoretical trend in understanding individuals' life career development (Chen, 1998a; Lent, & Hackett, 1994; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996). Both constructs have yielded some valuable insight in developing contemporary epistemological views that explicate human psychology in general, and vocational psychology in particular. There seems to be some comparable features between the two constructs in the career context. Albeit different, the two constructs are connected in explaining career psychology with respect to essential facets such as meaning, intentionality, purpose, and action. Agency without action leads to no end, and action without agency loses its momentum. Such an argument provides a rationale for further exploration and understanding of the two constructs, especially the possibility of their integration, in the field of career development and counselling.

It is beyond the scope of this article to cover all the major features associated with human agency and action theory and the relation between them. This article has three objectives. First, it will revisit very briefly the theoretical and research background of the two perspectives in order to form a conceptual basis for

discussion. Second, it will identify some of the connections between the notion of human agency and action theory. While recognizing differences, the article will focus more on the common ground shared by these two conceptualizations. Third, it will propose some career counselling implications that aim at enhancing the integration of individuals' action orientation and agentic functioning in their life career development.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Action theory

The use of action theory in the area of career development has received increased attention for the last decade, and a number of authors have contributed to the formation of its conceptual groundwork with research evidence (Polkinghorne, 1990; Young, Valach, Dillabough, Dover, & Matthes, 1994; Young, Paselukho, & Valach, 1997). Of particular note is the synthesized theoretical framework of a contextualist action theory explanation of career presented by Young and his colleagues (i.e., Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996; Young & Valach, 1996, 2000). The essence of this theory lies with the notion that action is goal-directed, purposeful, and intentional behaviour. According to Young, Valach, and Collin (1996), "action is conceptualized as being cognitively and socially steered and controlled. It is organized as a system that has hierarchical, sequential, and parallel dimensions" (p. 483). Action theory conceives of human action as a complex and multidimensional process that intertwines aspects such as action systems, perspectives on action, and levels of action organization. While these aspects interplay with one another, the common denominator they share is that they always interact with, reflect, and explain the very life career context in which they exist. It is this context that makes action meaningful and alive (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996).

Human agency

The notion of human agency is a key component in Bandura's social cognitive theory in general, and comparable to the concept of self-efficacy in particular (Bandura, 1977a, 1977b). Self-efficacy expectations, according to Bandura (1986), are "people's judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance" (p. 391). In career development and counselling, the term personal agency is often a synonym of perceived self-efficacy. Betz and Hackett (1987) suggested that the term agency is connected to aspects such as proaction, initiative, assertiveness, and persistence. In using the concept as one of the key constructs in social cognitive career theory, Lent et al. (1996) further postulate that self-efficacy is a part of the core foundation and mechanisms for people to exercise human agency. This seems to echo Bandura's (2001b) recent definition that human agency is the essence of humanness reflecting a person's capacity to exercise some gauge of control over the nature and quality of his or her own life.

Human agency is characterized by a number of core features. These include intentionality for shaping future plans and courses of action, temporal extension of agency through forethought, self-regulation of motivation, affect, and action through self-influence, and self-reflectiveness concerning one's functioning and the meaning and purpose of one's life. These core features of self-directedness enable humans to play a part in their own development, adaptation, and self-renewal (p. 12).

While this definition of human agency includes the central ideology of self-efficacy, it appears to expand substantially on the original conceptualization of human agency, and thus to encompass a range of facets in forming an integral and comprehensive picture of human cognitive and behavioural development. In studying people's agentic functioning in their life and career, Cochran (1990, 1991, 1997) and Cochran and Laub (1994) define the term in a more lay people's language. According to these authors, human agency is a combination of human intentions and actions to make things happen. "Action is an exercise of human agency, a person's power to act" (Cochran, 1997, p. 28).

There has been ample evidence in the literature supporting the vital role of human agency in people's life career development. Such evidence includes works in areas of theory, research, and practice (e.g., Bandura, 2001a; Betz, 2001; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1996; Lent, & Hackett, 1987). Not only have research results suggested that agentic functioning affects people's lives and careers, but also career counselling practice can integrate a sense of agency in varied forms and contexts, facilitating and enhancing clients' coping skills, personal well-being, and self-growth.

COMPARISON BETWEEN ACTION THEORY AND HUMAN AGENCY

The foregoing brief review of the key features of action theory and the notion of human agency appears to be helpful in paving the way for comparison and analysis. A fundamental common ground shared by action theory and the notion of human agency, as mentioned earlier, is the philosophical foundation of social constructionist ideology. This forms the bridge connecting the two perspectives. Without it, using action theory to enhance human agency in career development becomes impossible. Being reminded of this basic worldview underlining the two perspectives, the comparative discussion that follows will utilize information from previously cited sources, with a particular focus on key assumptions and tenets from Bandura (1986, 2001a, 2001b); Cochran (1990, 1991, 1997), Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994, 1996), and Young and his colleagues (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996; Young & Valach, 1996, 2000).

Actor and agent

A general philosophical ground shared by action theory and human agency is the recognition of human beings as actors and agents in their life and career episodes. To be is to do. As human beings, we virtually act in our every day life, and in every moment we live. Action may take different forms, and can be either

covert or overt. In a more narrow or specific sense, action may be illustrated by an act, an event, a task, or an observable outcome. Taking a broader perspective, action can mean to think, to perceive, to plan, to experience, to reconsider, to go through a long-time internal struggle, and the like. In other words, action can be a process with varied time requirement and effort commitment. The observable or tangible appearance of an act is certainly evidence of action. Meanwhile, a complex and lengthy process of affairs and occurrence can also represent a combination of action experiences. From this macro-view, a person always acts in some way in life. For example, inaction is sometimes a form of action, reflecting a passive stance or a deliberate coping mechanism toward one's environment.

Nevertheless, there are also some variances between the notions of actor and agent. In human agency, the term "actor" is often a synonym of "agent," focusing primarily on the individual's role in generating outcomes. According to Cochran (1997), an agent "is one who makes things happen" (p. 3). Focusing on mobilizing personal strength and capacity, the agent endeavours to achieve results based on individual drives and goals. The key function of an agent rests on responding proactively to external circumstances and exercising more control over his/her life effects (Amundson, 1995). The agentic functioning draws more attention to sequence and content. While other environmental influences are recognized in the process of action implementation, action in human agency is outcome-oriented. Nevertheless, the concept of actor in action theory conveys a more process-oriented meaning. It encompasses characteristics of an agent, yet goes beyond the level of individual agency. Actor in this sense is both a process constructor and a result creator. The actor interrelates to and interacts with others in a complex action system, undertaking and interpreting on-going experiences toward a more ideal solution.

Goal orientation and intentionality

Both perspectives emphasize the pivotal importance of intentionality and goal orientation in human life. Action and agency are not aimless, but purposeful. Individuals are with intention as they make things happen. Intentionality represents the essence of human psychology as it is composed of a combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioural facets that are involved in goal formation. While acknowledging the importance of cognition, action theory takes a more holistic stand toward the comprehension of major constructs in the action process. It suggests that to understand action, the three intertwined features, namely, manifest behaviour, internal processes, and social meaning need to be considered as a whole (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996). These three aspects interact and interrelate, constructing an integral and comprehensive context for action to take place. Intentionality is both a catalyst and a controlling construct accompanying these intermingled action features. Also, intentionality is more broadly and dynamically defined and explained. Rather than focusing on causality, goals and intentions are better understood and applied as a part of the whole process. It is

the complexity and openness of the action process that will form and reform human intention.

Rooted in social cognitive theory, the notion of human agency focuses more exclusively on a self-directed and self-regulated learning and implementation process (Bandura, 1982, 1986). It differs from action theory at least in three ways. First, the notion of human agency implies the need for a well-defined and well-organized self-regulatory system before the action can happen. For example, without an accurate self-efficacy expectation, an action is likely to generate unfruitful outcome. Second, intention with human agency is outcome-oriented, that is, it focuses solely on generating effective behaviour. Third, its intention on causality inclines to a more linear process of action. In comparison to the multifaceted and multi-dimensional process model presented by action theory, agentic perspective on action demonstrates a more task-oriented than process-oriented profile.

Meaning making and context

Intentionality represents the core of the psychological functioning in human beings. An enlarged profile of such a core functioning is about meaning making, meaning interpretation, meaning projection, and meaning application in our lives. The term “lives” is being used here in lieu of the inclusive appellation of “life” to highlight the contextual complexity of our experiences to live a life. That is, a person’s life is a general system that comprises a variety of interrelated smaller life units such as personal life, spiritual and/or religious life, familial life, socio-cultural/community life, school/professional life, political life, leisure life, and so on. These sub-life aspects are categorized in an arbitrary manner, and they can be re-named, re-defined, and re-grouped. This is not important here. What is important, rather, is the actual co-existence of all these life facets. These facets in one combination or another form the total context we live through our life span.

As cognitive and affective beings, we think and feel with or without observable behavioural activities. This general state of being rests on the very humanness essence of generating, interpreting, and executing meanings we live in every day life. Life career situations are certainly no exception. Persons make sense of what has happened, what is happening, and what is expected to happen. Living without meanings in our psychological being parallels living without oxygen in our physical being. It can be argued that the feeling of “meaninglessness” and claim of “emptiness” themselves are forms of meaning-interpretation. For example, the former may be triggered by the loss of a significant relationship or a professional identity, while the latter may be caused by the sense of lack of personal fulfillment or boredom in worklife routine. In short, whatever format it may take, meaning coexists, interplays, and intertwines with all aspects of our living.

Meaning-making processes, whether long-lasting or short-lived, do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they are always engaged in sociocultural, personal, and other contexts. It is the context that allows persons to make sense of their past,

present, and future experiences. An experience and its associated meanings can be interpreted very differently while its context varies. Likewise, a context provides a presupposition, a definition, a condition, or a dimension to explain the experience and its related meanings. Making sense of life career experiences requires a contextual foundation upon which persons can integrate their experiences and the environmental conditions in a truly meaningful manner. Human action and human agency become meaningless should the context for them to function be missing from the whole picture. Context thus configures, confines, and constructs the indispensable conditions for meanings to be generated and comprehended.

While both approaches recognize the significance of meanings and the context that defines these meanings, action theory and the notion of human agency vary in emphasis. Meaning and context in human agency attend to the more linear model of self-regulation and task-implementation, focusing on enhancing individuals' level of efficacy in the context that such efficacy is to be executed. It is hoped that through this person-environment interaction more effective outcomes can be achieved (Chen, 1999). Yet, action theory appears to take a more comprehensive and integrated stance in viewing the prospects of meaning and context. The action-theoretical approach (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996; Young & Valach, 1996, 2000) proposes that contextual meaning making is a multi-faceted, open, dynamic, and most of all, non-linear process accompanying the occurrence of human action. The contextual meaning reflects and facilitates the salient aspects of action systems such as individual action, joint action, project, and career (Young & Valach, 2000). Of particular note, action theory gives more attention to the role of human emotion in the action systems and processes.

Social dimension and individualism

Having recognized the vital influence of context in individuals' life and career, it becomes obvious that persons need to take into serious consideration the environmental situations and other circumstances such as relational aspects in life, when taking action and exercising agency. It is not that any person has unlimited options and ability to direct their own lives. Contextual reality can be either an optimal state or a withstanding condition. The former encourages, facilitates, supports, and strengthens persons' opportunities to achieve. In contrast, the latter restricts, decreases, hinders, and deters chances to succeed. There is no doubt that the self-focused agentic role is essential in making action happen. Yet, the scope of human action is often much more capacious, dynamic, and complex because of its ecological integration and interaction with various contexts in which it exists (Chen, 1999; Collin & Young, 1986).

The agentic perspective, due to its theoretical roots, has long been delineated in light of individualistic aspects of human psychology in general, and of vocational psychology in particular. These individualistic variables include, but are not limited to, a variety of self-related characteristics such as motivation,

perception, behaviour, deeds, activities, performance, and functioning. It is certainly sound to claim that nothing can provide magical help until a person takes the ownership of his/her own life. It is also true that unless the person becomes an agent first, positive changes and attainment will not become reality. The individual role in initiating and implementing action appears too significant to be ignored or even underestimated. Individualism is still a part of the sound ideology and solid practice in vocational psychology in our Western society. The apparent and pivotal role of individual agency is not in debate. Rather, what I would argue here is that the time has come to incorporate the sense of agency into a more comprehensive ecology of human action.

In illustrating the salient aspects of the action theory approach, Young and his colleagues (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996; Young & Valach, 1996, 2000) postulate that action systems are composed of four levels of sub-systems, namely, individual action, joint action, project, and career. The individually focused agentic functioning seems to share the groundwork with the first layer of the action systems, that is, individual action. Nevertheless, the other three layers of the action systems appear to expand on the individual action aspect, and go beyond the individualistic domain that has been highlighted by the notion of human agency. What links the systems of joint action, project, and career is the broadly defined social dimension as recommended by action theory (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996; Young & Valach, 1996, 2000). Individual action is certainly critical and justifiable. However, of equal significance, if not more significant, is the socially embedded joint action in the equation of project planning and career construction. "Project and career represent systems of action of mid- and long-term duration respectively. In other words we are proposing that people do not limit their interpretations of behaviour to single, individually based actions, but link actions over the mid and long term, represented here by constructs such as project and career" (Young & Valach, 2000, p. 188).

CAREER COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS

In his narrative approach in career counselling, Cochran (1997) elaborates the significant relevance of combining agency and intrinsically motivated action. First, it confirms that individual action and agency interrelate to each other in situations, composing vital plots in persons' life career episodes. Second, it implies that action and agency interplay with other contextual elements, resulting in and enriching a more complex and integral career narrative. This reflects the need for joint action. As Young and Valach (2000) point out, the concept of joint action is fundamental to human agency and its enhancement. Thus, it is relevant to consider proactively the integration of persons' action orientation and agentic role in their life career planning, adjustment, and enhancement. The central rationale for such an effort is that the action theoretical framework may provide a more comprehensive and holistic context for human agency to be formed, explained, and implemented.

In this section, I will revisit and probe some career counselling implications that facilitate the integration of action and human agency. First, counsellors need to form a favourable attitude toward action for the process to build and work. Second, in helping the client become an actor and agent, counselling must encourage a sense of agency and motivate the person to take action. Third, the social dimension and other related interpersonal issues and circumstances may be taken into serious account by promoting joint action through counselling and exploration. Fourth, while goal and intentionality are the core for the whole counselling process, they may need more attention in reprojecting action and agentic endeavour. Finally, constructing contextual narratives in career exploration aims at facilitating in-depth meaning making and interpretation, and this will hopefully lead to deep personal growth. It should be noted that these echoing themes do not represent a rigid and exclusive correspondence to the theoretical perspectives previously discussed. Many of these themes may overlap to some degree. For example, all the counselling implications are connected to aspects such as meaning, context, intentionality, and the social dimension discussed earlier.

Forming an action-orientation

There needs to be an action orientation to guide and facilitate the entire career counselling process. This implies that in building a general helping philosophy, the counselling process may adopt the social constructionist worldview in general, and action theoretical perspective in particular. Similar to other types of helping and counselling contexts, the first and foremost important task in career counselling is the counsellor's attitude and competency toward this helping framework. Career counsellors who are interested in and inclined to adopt this theoretical approach need to increase their own awareness on the issue. More effort may be devoted to career counsellors' professional training and development. The central attention may be directed to three key conditions. First, counsellors need to honestly examine their basic philosophy in approaching a helping relationship. In other words, counsellors need to believe in action theory and human agency before they can learn to apply the theoretical perspectives. Without this conceptual epistemology, applying action theory and enhancing human agency in a "technical manner" would be fruitless.

Second, as with any philosophical belief, counsellors need to widen the scope of their knowledge in this domain, focusing on understanding and digesting the essentials of these two theoretical perspectives. The key endeavour may be given to translating theoretical notions into more concrete explanations that can be applicable to career counselling practice. It is not unusual that practitioners are attracted to the principle of emerging social constructionist ideas, yet find these ideas are sometimes too abstract to utilize in their clinical work. A joint effort to improve the situation is advisable. Researchers and scholars may want to make their theoretical models, such as the new and emerging constructionist framework, include a theory-practice orientation. Meanwhile, practitioners may need

to encourage themselves to assume the dual role of scholar-practitioner. Continuing effort in professional development, especially focusing on expanding theoretical scope, seems to provide some promise for career counsellors in this respect. Third, integrating action theory and human agency in career counselling calls for adopting counselling approaches and helping strategies that are consistent with constructionist worldviews. A principle to follow may be that counsellors should become more integrated and eclectic in adopting helping techniques. More importantly, such helping methods should be used in an open, flexible, situational, and contextual manner.

Encouraging a sense of agency

Action theory, as pointed out earlier, is an effective catalyst and reinforcement for promoting and maintaining a sense of agency. Actors are agents in their own life journey. The two constructs are interchangeable on the level of individual action. In promoting this integration, career counselling can aim at helping clients strengthen and execute a sense of agency. Thus, the very essence of career counselling is to facilitate and empower clients to take the actor's role and responsibility in their personal life career dramas. Clients will become aware of the fact that it is eventually the actor's willingness and capacity to act that will make things different, leading to positive changes.

A strong sense of agency forms a psychological foundation for a variety of motivational and practical resources such as intentional effort and persistency, contextual knowledge, readiness for negotiation and compromise, decision-making strategies, social competency and problem-solving skills, and so on (Amundson, 1994, 1995; Chen, 1997a, 1997b). The call that a client has to become an actor or agent for his/her individual action constructs the very basis for joint action, project, and career to proceed. In short, the career process is, as Cochran argues (1997), to help clients become agents rather than patients in their real life narratives. Notwithstanding this sound claim, it is also worth noticing that the meaning of action and agency may vary as the context changes. For example, from a different cultural conceptualization, agentic role may mean reactive coping with a more subtle and enduring sense for making things happen, and making things better on the life career journey (Chen, 1996).

Promoting joint action

Perhaps among all the comparable aspects between the two perspectives, the most prominent contribution that action theory can make to enhance human agency is the notion of joint action. Both project and career share the common characteristics of joint action (Young, Valach, & Colliin, 1996; Young & Valach, 2000). The commonality of modern perspectives in vocational psychology is their sole attention to individuality (Gottfredson, 1996; Hotchkiss & Borow, 1996). This is absolutely pivotal, yet not sufficient. As life, career has a social dimension that covers a broad range of aspects and variables, such as those illustrated by Super (1990) as roles and theatres in his model of "life-career-rainbow."

Career counselling must address and attend to this rich, complex, and dynamic dimension of the total picture.

In using an action theoretical perspective, career counsellors can help clients frame their career exploration and planning in a joint-action context. The notion of joint action can actually be illustrated and naturally integrated through the entire counselling process. In revisiting past experiences, a client may become realize that significant others, for example, family members and friends, were co-participants in his/her action. Also, in bringing attention to immediacy, the client recognizes that the on-going client-counsellor working alliance is a demonstration of joint action. Further, in projecting future career, the client is encouraged to make consultation with family members and/or trusted ones in life, representing a joint action effort. As such, individual action or agency is well situated in a joint action context. Career counselling can thus facilitate the joint-action-oriented agentic implementation, addressing and reflecting a variety of complex social dimensions in the client's personal and vocational life pursuits. Strengthening and implementing a sense of joint action appears to be consistent in promoting clients' agentic function within the macro-ecology of life career development (Chen, 1999; Collin & Young, 1986). Joint action in career cannot happen without understanding the complex interrelations in such an ecological system. Career counselling can help to clarify and explain these relational facets, making joint action more constructive and smooth.

Reprojecting action and agency

Action theory recommends a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted system rather than a linear equation. This gives much space for change and development. In applying the action theoretical perspective to career counselling, human agency can be utilized and implemented in an open and reflexive manner. The action system facilitates reflexivity, that is, the back-and-forth interactive communications between various life career aspects and their contexts, in generating new perceptions and epistemology. As a consequence, new ways of doing things can result. This implies that the agentic role can be projected and reprojected. When the agency is once constructed and performed, it does not have to always remain the same state. Rather, it can be modified, amended, improved, or even redesigned when internal and external contexts vary or alter. Not only does the notion of career bring situations of joint action, but it also encourages an open attitude for change, and a constructive manner in reprojecting one's agentic role. Thus, persons' action implementation and agency exercise thus go through a refining process that is parallel to the notion of "framing" and "reframing" as described by Amundson (1995).

Career counselling can use this principle as a guideline to promote a healthy and constructive recycling for more effective agency and more optimal action outcome. In a career counselling encounter, counsellors may focus more on facilitating clients adopt an open view in their reflexive enactment (Cochran,

1997) and reenactment. One way is to use the counselling process as an action-oriented, dynamic, interactive, and experiential learning opportunity. For example, Amundson's (1998) "audio/video playback" (p. 125) technique can be a stimulus exploration tool in this regard. Similarly, the self-confrontation procedure used in career research may be well adopted by career counselling practice (see Young, Valach, Dillabough, Dover, & Matthes, 1994; Young, Paseluikho, & Valach, 1997; Young, Valach, Paseluikho, Dover, Matthes, Paproski, & Sankey, 1997). By observing and analyzing their own language and action that have been audio/video-taped sometime ago, clients become more aware of a variety of action aspects reflected in here and now, forming a basis for initiating agency. Another method is to facilitate "enacting live dramas" (Chen, 1997c, p. 567). The main idea of this approach is to encourage clients to enact in the real personal life and worklife contexts. In doing so, career counselling can become a part of the reflexive process, providing opportunity for action reframing and agency enhancement (Chen, 1997c).

Constructing contextual narrative

Integrating action and agency in persons' life career development is best actualized in contextual narratives (Cochran, 1997; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996). Human beings live narrative lives. Every moment of being follows the narrative flow that comprises cognitive, affective, and behavioural experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). Personal life and worklife integrate in a natural way, and they are constructed and progress with rich meanings enclosed (Peavy, 1993; Savickas, 1991). As a part of the person's total life, career making represents a narrative construction that conveys text content, plots, and climax to organize critical meanings in human action and experiences. It appears particularly important to consider the narrative nature of vocational psychology due to the fact that career acts and activities are intentional and purposeful. Without contextual meanings, there exists no action and agency. Action and agency are guided by the action intent and the sense of agency. Such intentions and senses encompass as well as reflect meanings. Action and agency only become alive when they are meaning-composed and meaning-oriented.

The narrative approach is particularly relevant in facilitating a meaning-making and meaning-interpretation process, which pinpoints the very essence of career counselling, that is, understand the meaning of career, or in Cochran's (1990) term, a sense of vocation. There has been growing interest and attention in the utilization of narrative methods in counselling in general, and in career counselling in particular (Cochran, 1997; Peavy, 1996, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1992; Young & Collin, 1992). A variety of narrative approaches and techniques have been generated for and/or adopted by career counselling practice. Narrative methods such as autobiographical work, textual approach, and metaphorical tactic (see Chen, 1998b) can all be incorporated into the career exploration process in a constructive manner, aiming at yielding meaningful insight for one's action and joint action in a career development context. Counselling techniques are

important. What is even more important is the helping philosophy behind the techniques. Among other things, three guidelines are worth considering in constructing contextual narratives. First, focus is on the complex experiences of a holistic person, and his/her relationship with others in both individual action and joint action situations. Second, one's subjective frame of reference, especially his/her emotion needs to be taken into serious consideration. Third, while one's past experiences are valued, the intent is present- and future-oriented. Career counselling helps clients project their action and agency in a forward-looking narrative that is not only informative and realistic, but also creative, fruitful, and optimal (Amundson, 1998; Chen, 1997a). The counselling process keeps the goal of facilitating clients' positive change and growth through their own narration so that a victim's and patient's script would be transformed into the story of an agent and actor who makes things happen (Cochran, 1997).

CONCLUSION

There appears to be close connections between action theory and the notion of human agency. While discrepancies between the two perspectives do exist, these two conceptions share much philosophical and practical common ground, rendering some promise for theoretical integration. It has been suggested that action theory can provide a framework for widening the spectrum of human agency, and for strengthening and enhancing a sense of human agency in persons' life career development. The multi-faceted and multi-dimensional explanation of human action presented by action theory illustrates a complex picture (Young & Valach, 2000; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996). This complex picture reflects a more comprehensive and holistic worldview in perceiving and understanding human acts and activities. Following action theory, human action goes beyond the scope of person-environment interaction; it takes into account a variety of intertwined aspects in an integral, dynamic, and even-changing human ecology.

To live a life is to become an actor and agent who takes the ownership of this life. Persons do not act in a vacuum, but in various social contexts. Action theory provides a sound philosophical foundation to conceptualize the various contexts and social dimensions within which human actions take place. Of particular note is the notion of joint action that is reflected in personal project and career (Young & Valach, 2000; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996). In this sense, personal agency is necessary, yet not sufficient. Individual action needs to be projected and implemented in a larger social dimension of joint action, making life career action a more dynamic and integral way of being. Career counselling practice must keep these basic relational constructs in mind.

In closing, it is perhaps necessary to reiterate the two primary prospects reflected through the entire discussion. First, all comparative aspects and counselling guidelines that have been delineated are very often overlapping, complementary, and supplementary in many ways. They intermingle and interplay,

making human action a comprehensive yet exciting phenomenon to study and to understand. Second, methods of helping need to remain open so that a variety of constructionist-oriented counselling strategies, as well as intervention techniques with other theoretical orientations, may be adopted. The enhancement of action calls for situational counselling approaches. A central helping philosophy should be, as Amundson (1998) suggests, to get clients actively engaged in becoming agents, and in actualizing their action plans. Meanwhile, counselling must keep in mind and address the complexity and multiplicity of human action as proposed by action theory, aiming to promote and facilitate a more holistic approach in projecting and implementing project in people's worklife and vocational development (Young, 2001). With an open attitude, various perspectives and career counselling strategies will be integrated to enhance human action and agency.

References

- Amundson, N. E. (1994). Negotiation identity during unemployment. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 31, 98-104.
- Amundson, N. E. (1995). An interactive model of career decision making. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 32, 11-21.
- Amundson, N. E. (1998). *Active engagement: Enhancing the career counselling process*. Richmond, BC: Ergon Communications.
- Bandura, A. (1977a). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.
- Bandura, A. (1977b). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall
- Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy theory in human agency. *American Psychologist*, 37, 122-147.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall
- Bandura, A. (2001a). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1-25.
- Bandura, A. (2001b). The changing face of psychology at the dawning of a globalization era. *Canadian Psychology*, 42, 12-24.
- Betz, N. (2001). Career self-efficacy. In F. T. L. Leong, & A. Barak (Eds.), *Contemporary models in vocational psychology* (pp. 55-77). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Betz, N. E., & Hackett, G. (1987). Concept of agency in educational and career development. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 34, 299-308.
- Brown, D. (1996). Status of career development theories. In D. Brown & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development* (3rd ed., pp. 513-525). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chen, C. P. (1996). Positive living with anxiety: A Morita perspective of human agency. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, 9, 5-14.
- Chen, C. P. (1997a). Career projection: Narrative in context. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 49, 311-326.
- Chen, C. P. (1997b). Perspectivity, projectivity, and perseverance: The 3P's in career counselling. *Guidance & Counselling*, 13 (1), 6-9.
- Chen, C. P. (1997c). Challenge-preparation: The "3E" approach in career counselling. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 49, 563-571.
- Chen, C. P. (1998a). Understanding career development: A convergence of perspectives. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 50, 441-465.

- Chen, C. P. (1998b). Ethnography and counselling: Comparative ways of meaning making. *Guidance & Counselling, 13* (2), 12-16.
- Chen, C. P. (1999). Human agency in context: Toward an ecological frame of career counselling. *Guidance & Counselling, 14* (3), 3-10.
- Collin, A., & Young, R. A. (1986). New directions for theories of career. *Human Relations, 39*, 837-853.
- Cochran, L. (1990). *The sense of vocation: A study of career and life development*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Cochran, L. (1991). *Life-shaping decision*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Cochran, L. (1997). *Career counseling: A narrative approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cochran, L., & Laub, J. (1994). *Becoming an agent: Patterns and dynamics for shaping your life*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Collin, A., & Young, R.A. (1986). New directions for theories of career. *Human Relations, 39*, 837-853.
- Gottfredson, L. S. (1996). Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise. In D. Brown & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development* (3rd ed., pp. 179-232). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hotchkiss, L., & Borow, H. (1996). Sociological perspective on work and career development. In D. Brown & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development* (3rd ed., pp. 281-334). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance [Monograph]. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 45*, 79-122.
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1996). Career development from a social cognitive perspective. In D. Brown & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development* (3rd ed., pp. 373-421). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lent, R. W., & Hackett, G. (1987). Career self-efficacy: Empirical status and future directions [Monograph]. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 30*, 347-382.
- Lent, R. W., & Hackett, G. (1994). Sociocognitive mechanisms of personal agency in career development: Pantheoretical prospects. In M. L. Savickas & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Convergence in career development theories: Implications for science and practice* (pp. 77-102). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Lent, R. W., Larkin, K. C., & Brown, S. D. (1989). Relation of self-efficacy to inventoried vocational interests. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 34*, 279-288.
- Peavy, R. V. (1993). Envisioning the future: Worklife and counselling. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 27*, 123-139.
- Peavy, R. V. (1996). Constructivist career counselling and assessment. *Guidance & Counselling, 11*(3), 8-14.
- Peavy, R. V. (1997). *Socio-dynamic counselling: A constructivist perspective for the practice of counselling in the 21st century*. Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1990). Action theory approaches to career research. In R. A. Young & W. A. Borgen (Eds.), *Methodological approaches to the study of career* (pp. 107-126). New York: Praeger.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1992). Postmodern epistemology of practice. In S. Kvale (Ed.), *Psychology and postmodernism methodological approaches to the study of career* (pp. 107-126). New York: Praeger.
- Sarbin, T. (1986). *Narrative psychology*. New York: Praeger.
- Savickas, M. L. (1991). The meaning of love and work: Career issues and interventions. *Career Development Quarterly, 39*, 315-324.

- Super, D. E. (1990). A life-span, life space approach to career development. In D. Brown & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development: Applying contemporary theories to practice* (2nd ed., pp. 197-261). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Young, R. A. (2001, June). *The notion of project in vocational psychology*. Paper presented to the Symposium "Future Directions in Vocational Psychology," at the Annual Convention of the Canadian Psychological Association, Laval University, Quebec.
- Young, R. A., & Collin, A. (Eds.). (1992). *Interpreting career: Hermeneutical studies of lives in context*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Young, R. A., Paselukho, M. A., & Valach, L. (1997). The role of emotion in the construction of career in parent-adolescent conversations. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 76, 36-44.
- Young, R. A., & Valach, L. (1996). Interpretation and action in career counseling. In M. L. Savickas & W. B. Walsh (Eds.), *Handbook of career counseling theory and practice* (pp. 361-375). Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black.
- Young, R. A., & Valach, L. (2000). Reconceptualising career theory and research: An action-theoretical perspective. In A. Collin, & R. A. Young (Eds.), *The future of career* (pp. 181-196). New York: Cambridge University Press
- Young, R. A., Valach, L. & Collin, A. (1996). A contextual explanation of career. In D. Brown, & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development* (3rd ed., pp. 477-512). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Young, R. A., Valach, L., Dillabough, J.-A., Dover, C., Matthes, G. (1994). Career research from an action perspective: The self-confrontation procedure. *Career Development Quarterly*, 43, 185-196.
- Young, R. A., Valach, L., Paselukho, M. A., Dover, C., Matthes, G. E., Paproski, D., & Sankey, A. (1997). The joint action of parents in conversation about career. *Career Development Quarterly*, 46, 72-86.

About the Author

Charles P. Chen, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). His scholarly interests are in life career development issues broadly defined, especially related to the inquiries of human agency, narrative exploration, and meaning making in career process.

Address correspondence to Dr. Charles P. Chen, Counselling Psychology Program, Department of Adult Education, Community Development, & Counselling Psychology, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT), 252 Bloor Street West, 7th Floor, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 1V6. E-mail: <cpchen@oise.utoronto.ca>.