Integrating the disciplines: Applying sociology of third space to contemporary, constructivist career development

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Abstract

The field of career development is grounded in diverse sociological perspectives contributing to addressing the complex interplay between individuals and societal contexts. This paper advocates for the use of a third space concept from cultural sociology traditions to working with marginalised clients and developing culturally sensitive career interventions. Applying this generative concept to constructivist career counselling, the relationship between counsellor and client is conceptualised as a productive boundary zone of an intercultural dialogue, which occurs in a broader environmental-societal system and advances the use of Systems Theory Framework of career development.

Keywords: career development, multi-disciplinarity, cultural sociology, third space concept, Systems Theory Framework

Introduction

During the first two decades of the new millennium, social, cultural, technological, and economic factors have been impacting and challenging the notions of work; the nature of work, the institution of work, and the complex interchange between work itself. In contemporary times, there has been an increased focus on global environmental concerns

and the preservation of life on Earth within the context of a post-globalization era (Carr, 2023). Additionally, the progress made towards attaining the United Nations (2015) Sustainable Development Goals has been a topic of concern (Arthur & McMahon, 2019). The global pandemic's impact on employment and individual workers has also been widely acknowledged. This has coincided with a rise in precarious work and a decline in access to satisfactory employment opportunities (Allan, 2023; Allan et al, 2021; Blustein et al., 2019; Kalleberg, 2018). Furthermore, there has been a renewed emphasis on the notion of a boundaryless world, particularly within the broader discourse on boundaries in the social sciences (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). These developments have augmented the ongoing discussions within the field of career development theory and practice. Interconnected global phenomena provide the overarching environmental-societal context in career development when viewed from the Systems Theory Framework perspective, and affect every individual, every culture, and the society at large (McMahon & Patton, 1995; Patton & McMahon, 2021). The increasing complexity of *modern work* (Schwartz et al., 2019), and the consequent emergence of new demands on career development practice and practitioners necessitate a revision of the question of the disciplinary integration. This may entail engaging in a more profound discourse regarding the disciplines that can be perceived as closely aligned with the current conditions of the world of work, and what concepts can be put forward to support multi-disciplinarity.

This paper begins with a brief overview of the conventional disciplines of career development and acknowledges the contributions of social sciences perspectives to the field. It then turns its attention to the concept of third space (Bhabha, 1994; Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1996) used in a range of social science and humanities disciplines and grounded in the traditions of cultural sociology and postcolonial studies. This paper then explores the potential of applying this concept to constructivist career development discipline and practice.

The authors present an example of contemporary studies that have utilised the analytical framework of the third space in the field of higher education. Specifically, these studies focus on the exploration of university staff members (i.e., professional staff who are often defined by the deficit term 'non-academic') who operate across various organisational boundaries, at times finding themselves marginalised while working across academic and professional domains and various non-traditional spheres of university activity. These actors experience transformations in their professional identities and work practices while working across different representational spaces. The purpose of discussing these examples is to promote the application of productive sociological and sociocultural perspectives in addressing complex career development issues that have been identified as concerns in this introduction.

The paper concludes by inviting career development scholars and practitioners to engage in a dialogue to promote the application of sociological traditions to career practice as inclusive, equitable, and effective constructivist approaches that address complex influences within modern work, individual professional identities and spaces which individuals inhabit in their work. It is suggested that further exploration of how third space concept can enhance the value and relevance of constructivist career theories, particularly within the context of the Systems Theory Framework of career development, can be timely and appropriate.

Conventional disciplines in career development

The foundations of career development theories lie in psychology. Differential psychology was used to match an individual's personality traits with the specific attributes of different occupations, enabling the identification of the most suitable vocational fit (Hambly & Bomford, 2019). However, the existing theories that have traditionally emphasised individual internal psychological factors in career development (e.g., Holland's matching theory and Super's developmental approach) have faced criticism for not considering the socio-economic constraints in individuals' career decision-making. This criticism has prompted the involvement of sociologists in this field. Sociologists have expanded the understanding of contextual elements that significantly impact an individual's career development (e.g., social class, gender, and cultural background), thereby integrating social perspectives into their scholarly inquiries. Roberts (1975) argued that the implementation of a self-concept (e.g., Super, 1990) is not relevant for all individuals, as life opportunities are often linked to those who already occupy privileged position in society. The self-concept perspective, therefore, tends to favour certain groups while excluding others.

Acknowledging these criticisms, scholars in the field of career development have been integrating both individual and environmental perspectives, as represented by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994), Systems Theory Framework (STF: McMahon & Patton, 1995), and Psychology of Working Theory (PWT: Blustein, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016). While SCCT encompasses contextual, personal, and behavioural factors (e.g., self-efficacy, social support, and goal setting; Lent & Brown, 2019), STF includes various systemic influences, including social and environmental-societal factors (Patton & McMahon, 2021). In addition, economic constraints and instances of marginalisation are positioned as the primary contextual predictor variables in PWT (Duffy et al., 2016). Thus, these theories emphasise constraints and marginalisation that are less likely to lead to stable employment. Beyond these theories in career development, other social science disciplines, such as anthropology, business, economics, education, geography, history, and political science, have contributed to the field of career development (Gunz, 2009; Hambly & Bomford, 2019). For example, the business discipline has actively engaged in facilitating workplace career development, focusing on career management, motivation, and task performance. Since career development cannot be comprehended from a singular perspective, it is essential to embrace various disciplines (Arthur & McMahon, 2019; Collin, 2009; Collin & Patton, 2009).

Sociology of third space and boundary crossing

The concept of third space is explored in social theory (Bell, 1976; Bourdieu, 1984) across a range of social science and humanities disciplines including *inter alia* anthropology, cultural and gender studies, education, geography and, primarily, in sociology and cultural sociology, in particular. The concept had been used productively to explore social relationships, diversity, and boundaries (Barstow, 2018; Bhabha, 1994; Lossau, 2009; Routledge, 1996; Soja, 1996). Lefebvre (1974) initially positioned space as central to dynamic social relations. Space was later particularised by Foucault (1984) and Knott (2005) as a socially constructed, activity-generating reality as opposed to static backdrop. Space, according to Massey (1993, 2005), represents temporality, process, and progression, connecting local and global social relations.

Scholarly preoccupation with the spatial turn among researchers and educators across a range of social sciences emerged in the final decades of the 20th century (Veles, 2022). The transition between the centuries was accompanied by the complexities of a constantly changing environment, further defragmentation of work, and a departure from understanding careers as a linear and singular path through working life. In people's working lives, the increasing complexity and multi-layered nature of professional identities suggested further that the two-dimensional – historical (temporal) and social (sociological) – representations of the world appeared to be no longer sufficient. A series of critical re-imaginings of the world and human condition precipitated the emergence of a third – spatial – dimension of productive and reproductive unification of the physical, the social and the mental (Ikas & Wagner, 2009; Smith, 2004; Soja, 1996, 2010).

Within the spatial, third space appears when an invisible line is drawn between inside and outside culture, between various identity groups, delineating social and organisational structures. Since it is impossible to imagine a completely dichotomous world, interstitial spaces inevitably come to being, thereby representing cultures, identities and structures that belong to neither one nor another world. It presents an 'interstitial passage between fixed identifications…[with the] possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4).

Continuous recombination and exchange among multiple identities and diverse perspectives is what makes third space simultaneously 'a place of critical exchange' (Soja, 1996, p. 5) and 'collaboration and contestation' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

Third-space thinking possesses not only metaphorical appeal, but analytical power: exploring spaces that expressly value difference while preserving individual voices and amplifying unique stories provides insights into ways through which social and professional interactions with people of different cultures and professional identities create something truly unique, which may at times be more meaningful than each of them would have created on her or his own. Despite linguistic ambivalence discussed by Lossau (2009), the concept of third space remains meaningful and generative. Widely applied in education theory and practice (Daza et al., 2021; Janzen & Petersen, 2020; Leonard et al., 2023; McAlpine & Hopwood, 2009; Zeichner, 2010), third space concept has been engaged to explore the organisational complexity of higher education discourses (Thomas, 2015). Whitchurch (2008, 2012) extended the concept to higher education research, investigating contributions from multiple actors (academic and professional staff alike) beyond rigid boundaries of organisational divisions, job descriptions and role scopes).

The emergence of a novel representation of socio-cultural influences and dimensions through space and the application of the concept of third space, allows individuals to create diverse, new, and unique identities, envision unexplored domains of employment, devise innovative approaches to work, and imagine unprecedented careers. Such novel representation is argued by the authors as being strongly connected to systems thinking in a way that it allows people to be in touch with the 'wholeness of [their] existence' (Flood, 2010, p. 282) while thinking about themselves in the context of multiple, interconnected influences and becoming aware of potentiality of other choices and opportunities in their lives (Patton & McMahon, 2021).

Third-space thinking, however, goes beyond systems thinking as it carries the potential to enhance personal empowerment, foster a sense of agency, and advance self-efficacy. In

career practice, and in constructivist career counselling in particular, third-space thinking can be instrumental in understanding how individuals conceptualise their careers within the social and cultural contexts that shape their lives. For career practitioners, third-space thinking advances the practices of culture-infused career counselling (Arthur, 2017; Arthur & Collins, 2011) and helps to reveal environmental influences affecting vulnerable clients and marginalised communities, their personal and collective identities, and the complex interplay of both. Client conceptualisation and designed career interventions through and with the assistance of socio-cultural third space promote a perspective that is both dynamic and contextually situated. This perspective not only incorporates spatial thinking into systems thinking, but also advances the latter by illuminating socially and culturally ambiguous interstices that exist between established categories. These spaces, often overlooked or ignored, attend to critical matters like systemic injustices, exclusionary work practices and misrecognition and necessitate a strong commitment to social justice advocacy in the realm of career development.

The concept of third space was used to research various professional practices, with higher education studies being one such example. The example provided below is to demonstrate the analytical power of third space concept applied to one group of higher education workers, namely, professional staff working across multiple organisational domains of academia and professional services, and discuss how the learnings from this research can be applied to career development field of practice.

The concept of the university third space has been used to explore how the university staff who work across multiple organisational boundaries and, therefore, engage in complex identity-making and continuous identity-reshaping interpret their boundary-crossing work (Veles, 2022; Whitchurch, 2008, 2018). As universities worldwide extend their agendas beyond the traditional anchors in teaching and research, and therefore broaden their areas of operation, they are also redefining their connections with various local, national, and international communities, such as schools, industries, and other research and community organisations. Consequently, the conventional university dichotomy between academic and professional roles and identities is becoming obsolete as it no longer reflects the contemporary university organisation (Veles, 2022; Whitchurch, 2008).

These newly established spaces serve as a meeting point for both academics and diverse professionals who are employed as non-academics to collaborate on university projects, generate innovative ideas, and cultivate novel practices that contribute to the advancement of the university's objectives and the fulfilment of its institutional mission. Individuals working across boundaries, whether routinely or through specially designed projects, became identified as third space professionals (Whitchurch, 2012). They often engage in activities requiring multiple knowledge sets relating to academic disciplines, organisational systems, professional expertise, competencies of relationship development and translation skills to connect all these weakly connected systems. Such boundary-crossing activities (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) include, *inter alia*, academic development and academic advising, digital technology development, research funding policy and implementation, student engagement and learning support, academic library liaison, community partnerships, employability, career support for students and staff and integrating career and the world of work competencies into the academic curricula (Veles et al., 2023).

Research demonstrates that working in third spaces can be rewarding for some and controversial for others (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022; Veles, 2023; Whitchurch, 2008; 2023). One characteristic of third space work is its systemic invisibility within the organisation and the corresponding lack of recognition of the contributions of those working in those invisible spaces, especially on behalf of senior members of the institution. Non-traditional boundary zones create new practices belonging to neither constituent practice site. They are not 'neatly' positioned in the existing organisational structure and are at times overlooked for their fluid and transient nature, which creates invisibility of people and under-recognised effort and awkward positioning of the third space workers. On the other hand, working across boundaries in those interstitial and even invisible to organisation spaces enriches practices and improves the knowledge of the participating individuals about respective knowledge and practice sites and developing new ways of learning and doing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Akkerman & Bruining, 2016). Working on novel and emerging new spaces assists in addressing and, at times, erasing the unhelpful beliefs founded in the traditional organisational binary of academic and non-academic work, practices, and identities (Veles, 2022).

Working within third spaces entails various implications for professional relationships, personal identity, legitimacy, and social standing. Additionally, it offers prospects for unconventional career paths for individuals. It is therefore crucial to approach interactions in these spaces with an understanding and acknowledgement of distinct backgrounds, and often dissimilar and nonetheless valuable viewpoints of people involved. This approach is necessary to ensure proper recognition of their contributions and to assist them in effectively navigating the tensions and challenges that arise from engaging in cross-boundary work. Whether people occupy those hybrid spaces by the design of their work arrangement or through engagement in time-framed projects, third space professionals find the process of constructing their identities and careers non-linear and at times challenging (Obexer, 2022). There is an identified deficit in clear career pathways (Gander et al., 2019; Moran & Misra, 2018; Whitchurch, 2023) for such individuals. This is partly related to multiple stakeholders with whom they interact, more than one professional group membership to which they may belong, many ways of defining and enacting professionalism and specialism through their work. It is also partly through their own lack of clarity about imagining their future work, place and space within and outside the organisational reality. Should they continue working in third spaces, and creating new identities, engaging in new work roles, designing their own work profile, and displaying hybrid career orientations (Hall, 2004)? Or should they transition to one or the other – academic or professional – space, and if yes, would this be perceived as a departure instead of advancing their career aspirations? Or are there other, perhaps not yet explored, futures for them outside the world of academia?

To effectively navigate the complex issues faced by third space professionals who possess hybrid career orientations of conventional and modern job values, it is crucial for career practitioners to employ a culturally sensitive and socially just approach. This entails providing specialised support to individuals in this unique position. Career practices that are informed by cultural sociology and third-space thinking entail the collaboration between career practitioners and third-space clients to explore the potential for cultivating sustainable careers. These careers are characterised by a series of similar or diverse professional experiences that unfold over time. They are also marked by the presence of various patterns of continuity in terms of crossing boundaries between different work and

learning environments, extending beyond organisational and social contexts. To provide meaning during the whole lifespan, sustainable careers require from clients the intentional exercise of individual agency (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015), in which career practitioners can be of service as they deploy third-space thinking to practice.

Utilising productive sociocultural perspectives in addition to drawing on foundational knowledge of psychology for career development practice is likely to assist in addressing the complex career concerns of clients. Clients in this category frequently encounter the necessity to engage in intentional efforts to construct and harmonise multiple professional identities. This process involves ongoing interaction with diverse bodies of knowledge and demands the development and regular updating of multifaceted skills to enhance various aspects of their work and aid stakeholders across multiple domains. These challenges are intensified by the unpredictability of the contemporary work environment, which affects all individuals seeking career development, regardless of whether they operate within conventional and well-defined contexts or within ambiguous and fluid spaces.

Concluding thoughts on generative integration of sociological and career development perspectives

It would be remiss if this paper concludes without mentioning the warning of Vondracek and Porfeli (2008) against using 'antiquated theories or narrow adaptations of circumscribed or segmental models from psychology, sociology, or anthropology' (p. 216). It would also be neglectful of the authors if the paper does not comment on how the proposed integration of the disciplinary perspectives advances the postulates of the already mature, live and highly generative Systems Theory Framework of career development (Patton & McMahon, 2021).

The authors argue that career development scholars and practitioners face a challenge in finding a comprehensive model that adequately encompasses the intricate nature of human functioning and development within various contexts. According to Vondracek and Porfeli, no single unifying model or metatheoretical framework can fully address the diverse influences of environmental and individual factors on the lifelong process of career development. Furthermore, these models must also consider the ethical implications, promote diversity, and advocate for clients who may be insecure or vulnerable. The weight of this ambitious undertaking in supporting careers that require navigating extraordinary challenges of legitimising horizontally produced knowledge, diversity of cultures and identities, and generating new and novel meaning across boundaries (Akkerman et al., 2006; Aveling et al., 2015, Veles, 2022).

It is for these reasons that the article advocates the integration of cultural sociology and its generative concept of third space, with its focus on professional identity and career hybridity, into constructivist career development with its attention on individuals – clients and career counsellors – co-constructing clients' career stories, identities, and lives. Such integration has the potential to deepen the understanding of the interplay between personal-behavioural, social, and relational and broader contextual factors in shaping the career trajectories of individuals.

Deliberate work on the integration of third-space critical thinking can support individual aspirations for meaningful construction of work anchored in social purpose, authentic values and harmonic well-being (Di Fabio & Blustein, 2016) while further assisting individuals in achieving sustainable careers (De Vos et al, 2020; Van der Heijden, & De Vos, 2015), accessing decent work and living and enjoying decent lives (Di Fabio, Medvide, & Kenny, 2022), which are the goals of contemporary career development of the increasingly complex modern life.

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