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Practitioner Wellbeing

What do you bring into your guidance practice? And what remains with you when the client has left?

Gill Frigerio, Associate Professor, Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Warwick

We know that career development work is about people in context, about how an individual makes sense of themselves and their identity, as well as being about social structures, opportunities and pathways. Yet the guidance theories we draw on when working one-to-one with people on their own career development often place emphasis solely on the two people in conversation. How do we bring wider contextual factors into our thinking?

Taking care of ourselves

I observe in our field a potential to focus predominantly on the context of our client, rather than considering how our own identities and influences are present in our career guidance practice. Whilst we are rightly centring our work on the learning needs and career development of our client, when we forge a learning alliance (McCash, 2021) with a client, we are also fully present and involving ourselves in an interaction. In the UK, where I practice, we have a [Career Development Institute code of ethics](#) which states that we have

duty of care to *ourselves* as well as to our clients and employers. Maintaining our capacity to practice requires us to give this some attention.

In this article, I will outline how the integrative framework developed by Australian scholars Mary McMahon and Wendy Patton, known as the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development, can be a useful tool in considering how we maintain our own practitioner wellbeing. I will go on to link it with current ideas about meaningful work, a sense of calling in career development, and the current issues facing many of us in our profession.

Introducing the Systems Theory Framework

Patton and McMahon (1999, 2006, 2014, 2021) map a wide range of career development theories which look at career development from a range of perspectives and then use systems theory principles which originate in biology to build a meta-theoretical framework. This maps the complex interplay of multiple interactions over two open systems: the individual and their context. We could think about our clients as that individual, or ourselves as practitioners, since we are also engaged in developing our careers!

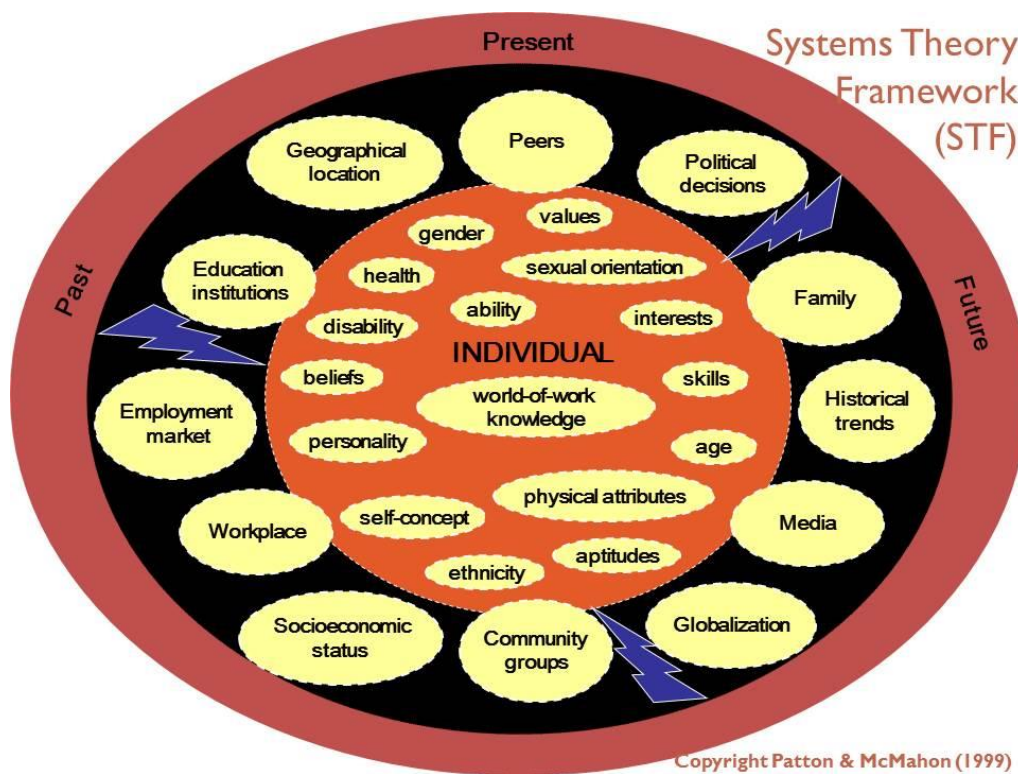


Figure 1: The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (Patton and McMahon, 1999)

Look at figure one and imagine the orange circle of the individual with all its components in yellow: the individual is central to this framework and the components are cast as **influences**. Beyond this individual system, the contextual system (in black) distinguishes in proximity to the individual, with the social context represented by six influences which

overlap: peers, family, media, workplaces, community groups and educational institutions. Altering our focus to a more expansive view enables us to see wider societal-environmental influences such as geographical location, political decisions, historical trends, globalisation, socioeconomic status and the employment market. The dotted lines around each influence, or part of the system, represent recursivity, whereby each component is porously impacting on every other. The model also holds the significance of change over time in red (denoted as past, present and future) and chance events (represented as blue lightning flashes).

So as an individual I can understand my interests and values as shaped by other aspects of my identity (fixed or otherwise) such as my gender or my world of work knowledge, and vice-versa. Moreover, all these aspects of me as individual are influenced by, and can have an effect on, my family and community, my workplace, my socio-economic context, my world.

As a systems theory, Patton and McMahon focus on the interplay between parts of a system and the whole, moving both ways between the two rather than just one way or the other (from parts to whole or from whole to parts). Imagine all those coloured bubbles moving freely, bumping into one another and thus changing shape and direction, like the bubbles of a lava lamp.

The coronavirus pandemic is an excellent way of illustrating a systems reading of events: a global pandemic whose spread was facilitated through our globalized world yet where impacts varied according to political and economic contexts. Individuals' responses also depended on intra and interpersonal factors and shaped social dynamics. There was nothing like it for showing how we are all indeed connected.

We have our system, and it's a good starting point for a critically reflexive approach to practice – who are we and how does our system influence the self that we bring to work?

Practitioner and client – two systems align

Let's go further, by considering our system alongside that of the client. Patton and McMahon call this 'the therapeutic system' (fig 2). The bubbles are moving around a shared space with aspects of our own system influencing our clients and our work to facilitate their career development learning, as well as vice versa. The organisational system becomes part of the outer layer as the policy context and career service management affect how the client and practitioner work together: is it a paid for service? how are outcomes monitored? etc.

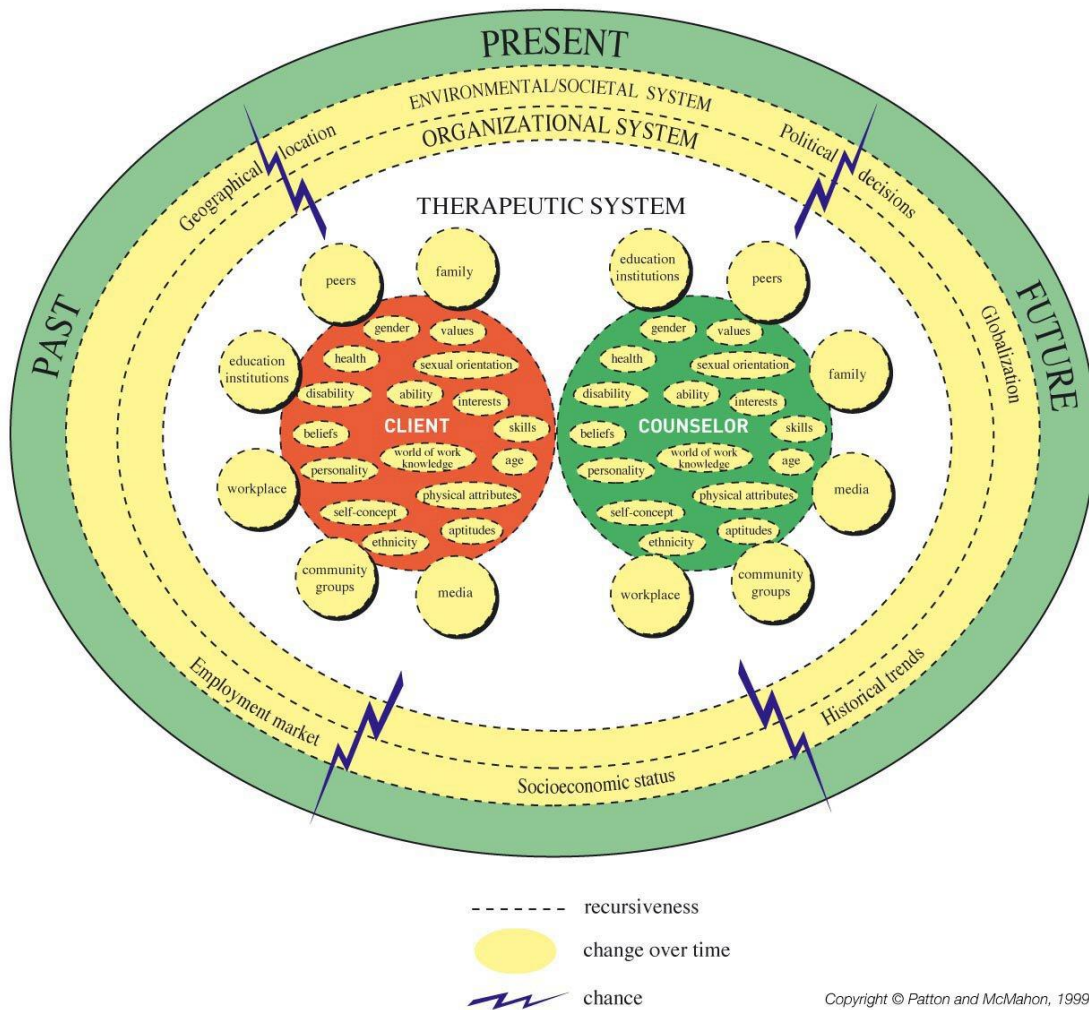


Figure 2: The therapeutic system

So, when we work with a client, we are responding to their system according to our own set of influences and experiences, even if this is not immediately visible. Spotting how this is happening is a really useful tool for our professional development: we can see how client work shapes us over time, as well as reflecting on particular encounters and where there might have been some recursive mutual influencing going on.



Bilde: Colourbox. A peacock only shows the full colours of their magnificent tails on specific occasions, yet it is always there behind them. It might not be appropriate to engage in the self-disclosure of all our contextual influences with our clients, but they are there anyway.

Working with calling

This leads me on to the concept of calling, and how the potential and implications of seeing work as a calling has been a significant theme in the career development literature over the last twenty years. Much of the attention has focused on research with working age populations in general, or in specific industries or contexts. We can of course consider the relevance of this for our clients, but I want to bring the attention back to us, working in career guidance, and what it might mean for our own career development, our effectiveness and our wellbeing.

There are a series of definitions of calling in use in the literature, all of which centre on the draw people may have to a particular field of work in which they find meaning. Studies generally associate callings with increased work and life satisfaction and overall wellbeing, although barriers to being able to enact a perceived calling due to structural constraints are acknowledged. Callings vary in the language used to describe them, from the externally focused such as commitments to service and a sense of duty or destiny on the one hand, perhaps closer to the more ancient religious meanings of the term, to the internally focused concepts of self-actualisation and personal fulfilment. The potential for career development work to explore the process of both perceiving a calling and enacting it is immense, and research has particularly homed in on the process of crafting our jobs to better align with a call in ways that give much potential for practice. Maybe you find these concepts helpful

yourself as you have found your way into career guidance work and developed your own career.

The dark side of calling: a threat to decent work

However, scholars have also identified a 'dark side' to calling, acknowledging that a sense of call might be what keeps us in jobs with poor terms and conditions and suggesting that employers may even exploit that to their benefit (see Bunderson and Thompson, 2009: a qualitative study of zookeepers for more detailed discussion. The work commitment that comes with a calling might also lead workers to over identify with their work, neglecting non work roles and working longer hours than are healthy. Calling brings with it very real risks of work-related stress, even leading to burnout: a serious health concern which brings reduced cognitive function and affected performance. As a nursing-based study commented: "You can't burn out unless you have been on fire!" (Donnelly, 2004). Added to this the phenomenon of moral injury which is understood as a risk of being asked to work in ways against our personal values and there are some risks to our wellbeing we need to bear in mind. This presents a real threat to the 'decent work for all' enshrined in the [UN's eighth sustainable development goal](#).

Perhaps not to the same extent as nursing, career guidance remains a profession which attracts a workforce in which women make up a majority. We know that a macro perspective shows that women are more likely to bear the burden of a 'double shift' as the combine work with domestic and caring duties, and the disproportionate impact on women of the pandemic has been well documented, so this is yet another way in which gender impacts on our work.

Labour market watchers are spotting these trends at large: we have heard about the 'great resignation' as people allegedly re-evaluated their lives after the trauma of living through the pandemic. Perhaps better coined the 'great rethink', it has also led commentators to note the potential of 'quiet quitting' or in China, lying flat (tang ping), where work is deprioritised in people's lives as they realise the consequences for them of overwork. Of course quiet quitting can also be framed as 'doing enough but not more', and perhaps that is all our employers should be able to expect? We are not immune ourselves from these 'winds of change'.

If you recognise some of these risk factors in your own working life, I hope that the systems theory framework might enable you to articulate some of the complexity of your context. Those beautiful tailfeathers look so heavy when a peacock is dragging them on the floor. Yet some focus on your own development and a recognition of the depth and breadth of ways we can have an impact on our clients can give the boost needed to spread them gloriously for all to see.

References

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