

Single disciplinary perspectives and their emergence in the history of career development

Career studies has a long history within different disciplines. In this editorial we sketch out some of the key disciplinary perspectives on 'career', and their origins and implications for the field.

Psychology

Arguably psychology is the dominant academic discipline in the study of career development. Its relationship to the field dates almost to the beginning of the vocational guidance movement in the early years of the 20th century. Approaches to support vocational choice was one of the first applications of applied psychology.

It was differential psychology, and its associated psychometric assessment approaches that provided the technology underpinning matching approaches to vocational guidance. This is a tradition that persists to the present day. However, other topics of study within psychology have been salient at different points in time. Counselling became influential in career guidance in the UK by the early 1970s. This continues to be a major focus for academic inquiry into careers work. By the 1990s organisational behaviour became a location for the study of managerial and professional careers within large employers.

Psychology is a large discipline, and it could be understood in terms of sub-disciplines. But it is also a profession with specialist training and qualification routes, and these constructs partially overlap. In the UK we might identify relevant sub-disciplines around counselling psychology, and occupational and organisational psychology. More recently the emergence of coaching psychology has adapted counselling thinking for a non-clinical setting. The logic of sub-disciplines and professional structures does not necessarily cross international boundaries. In the USA, the most prolific source of psychology for career development, the category of vocational psychology encompasses both counselling and occupational perspectives. There is also a substantial and distinct body of work on managerial and professional careers produced by business psychologists. Collin and Patton (2000) characterise the study of career as a conversation between two dominant positions: vocational psychology and organisational studies. However, a case can be made that these represent two distinct traditions in the literature with limited dialogue between them, indeed Healy, Hammer & McIlveen (2022) found that this divide translated into a split between a career development and a graduate employability literature in the higher education sector.

Sociology

Arguably the formal study of career originates in the discipline of sociology in Chicago in the early 20th Century. The contribution of sociology to our understanding of career in the UK had become substantial by the 1970s. It is second only to psychology in the scale of its influence on career development thinking. In addition to an early focus on the sociology of work, educational sociologists have made a major contribution. The transitions from youth to adulthood and from education to employment have become an international object of study.

It has been sociology that has provided the intellectual underpinning for the focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion in the career development profession. This has been through foregrounding structural factors in careers notably socio- economic status and local labour markets (Roberts e.g 2005). It has also come from feminist perspectives, translated into considerations for career development practice by Bimrose (e.g. 2001).

A useful overview of the contribution of sociology to the field is provided by Bimrose (2019).

Education

A distinctive feature of the British contribution to career development has been an educational perspective, which perhaps became important in the 1970s and 1980s. This contribution has often come from NICEC Fellows, and is evident in the back catalogue of this Journal. Educational perspectives put the concept of learning as centre stage. Here the work of Bill Law has been particularly influential – an archive of his extensive body of work is now being developed on the NICEC Website: www.nicec.org

Economics

Economics has been relevant to career largely through its sub-discipline of labour market economics. Whilst it has been on the scene for a long time, improved accessible of digital labour market data and analysis has meant its influence has increased since the turn of the millennium. The usefulness of this to practice is contested (e.g. Alexander, 2023).

Policy studies

Although the earliest public policy relating to vocational guidance dates to 1910, policy studies did not enter the arena of career development scholarship until the mid-1990s. At this stage we see influential work such as Watts (1996), and the creation of the International Centre for Career Development in Public Policy.

Neglected disciplines

Despite career studies incorporating a wide range of different disciplinary perspectives we would argue that there are a number of academic disciplines which have great potential, but have not yet been fully deployed in the study of career and career development.

Some of these disciplines are featured in this issue. They include geography, philosophy, and media studies. Other disciplines that merit serious consideration include information science, which was addressed by Milosheva et al (2022) writing in this Journal. The study of health, particularly public health and mental health can also intersect with career (e.g. Robertson, 2013; 2014). Anthropology represents another neglected but valuable perspective, with cultural insights to offer, for example on the transition from childhood to adulthood.

In addition to neglected disciplines, there are also neglected corners of disciplines that are already engaged with the career development space. For example, educational psychology, and economic psychology.

Interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinarity: When disciplines are in dialogue

In the introduction to this editorial, we suggested that career studies is necessarily an interdisciplinary field. However disciplinary boundaries are not necessarily rigid. A discipline represents a cluster of theoretical perspectives, research methods, a body of literature, and a distinctive tradition of thought that is passed on by teaching. Research methods and philosophies are often shared between social science disciplines. To some extent theoretical concepts from one field can also be imported into another. Indeed, the boundaries between some social sciences are very permeable. Policy studies, education, labour market economics, and employment studies are multidisciplinary in nature and partially overlapping when they address issues such as skills and careers. Arguably, psychology tends to try harder to maintain a distinct identity from the other social sciences. In a sense a discipline represents an academic community, and communities may vary in how energetically they maintain their traditions and their boundaries.

Here it is useful to distinguish between interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinarity but, as Collin (2009) points out, the distinctions between them are blurred and definitions may not be shared. She also suggests that although there have been calls for interdisciplinarity in the study of career, there has been little action. However, McCash et al (2020) clearly identify career development as a transdisciplinary field. From this perspective the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Career (and career development interventions) represent a field of study that provides a central integrating focus for diverse perspectives, and – at least to some extent – scholarship which can transcend disciplinary boundaries. This latter position is close to our own.

A time and a place for disciplinary dialogue

To some extent telling the story of disciplinary perspectives is to recount the history of the study of careers and career development. Traditions emerge, become influential, and then are partially sidelined by new perspectives – but they rarely disappear. With the possible exception of psycho-dynamic perspectives on career choice, few perspectives have exited the stage. Although the field of career studies arguably originated in the disciplines of psychology and sociology, as we have demonstrated there is a growing diversity of disciplinary perspectives on career, and emerging new disciplinary perspectives. This, we would suggest makes now a good time to surface and explore disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinarity as relevant concepts in progressing the field of career studies.

At the same time a growing international and transnational literature on career is also raising the importance of considering disciplinarity. In different parts of the world, the study of careers has often been approached from different disciplines. In particular there appear to be trans-Atlantic differences, with a stronger tradition of research from the discipline of psychology in the USA. That said, in recent years the field of vocational psychology has become more permeable to socio-economic and political perspectives, and expanded to include content more often associated with other social sciences. This is evident in the work of Blustein (e.g. 2006).

In Europe in general, and the UK in particular, the study of career has been more a multidisciplinary endeavour, with sociology and education having a voice. The multi-lingual nature of Europe and its cultural, political, and economic diversity is both a barrier to the sharing of knowledge and a fertile ground for different disciplinary perspectives (Khapova et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Career studies is a transdisciplinary field: the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Many disciplinary perspectives are valid, but some promising ones are under-developed. Perspectives evolve over time and there are national differences.

Several disciplines are better for describing careers than they are at informing career interventions. But even where disciplines do not provide explicit recipes for the design of career services, they may help us to think radically differently about the nature of careers, and from that new ways of working may emerge.

New thinking is welcome in this Journal. We hope this selection of articles inspires you to reflect on the disciplinary perspectives you bring to this project.



In this issue

Phil McCash takes us back to the origin of career studies by exploring the enduring legacy of the Chicago School of sociology on our field. He argues their interactionist perspective helps to integrate the study of careers.

Natalia Veles and Sujin Kim explore the sociology of the 'third space'. This approach brings together cultural sociology with a systems perspective on career development.

Ghazal Vahidi, Sarah Barnard, and John Arnold introduce us to media studies as a new discipline with much to offer the study of the discourse surrounding careers.

Robin Stevens demonstrates how philosophy can inform how we will live our life/career - and help others to do so - using existential perspectives as way to illustrate this.

Rosie Alexander outlines what social geography has to offer, and the value and influence of spatial understandings of career.

Gill Frigerio provides a way of thinking about collaboration between disciplines in career development, and explores how this connects to pedagogy in the training of career development practitioners.

However, we must open this special issue on a sad note, with a stand-alone commemorative article. **Tristram Hooley, Rie Thomsen and Manwel DeBono** give

us an insight into the contribution of Professor Ronald Sultana of the University of Malta, who passed away towards the end of 2023. His contribution to the field was rooted in educational sociology, but expanded to comparative international policy studies. He led landmark studies of career development provision in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. His work was influenced by a concern for social justice, and he brought a strong critical perspective to his writing. To the NICEC Fellows who worked with him, he was a kind and generous collaborator. This Journal could not let his passing go without a prominent recognition of his widely influential body of work.

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