
Exploring the value of the sociological Careership Theory in the South African TVET context

Lucky Maluleke, Lesley Powell and Shervani Pillay
Nelson Mandela University

ABSTRACT

Making a career decision is an important part of life. A plethora of theories seek to understand the way students make career decisions, most of them found in the field of psychology. The same trend is evident in South Africa, where psychology continues to underpin career guidance and counselling practices. While this is useful, it is equally important to consider different theoretical approaches – for example, the sociological approach. This article is inspired by a doctoral study conducted by one of the authors, and aims to bring to light a less dominant theory that can add value to our understanding of career decision-making, especially in the public Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college sector. The main argument of the article is that whereas all theories are important and valuable, no single theory can explain all situations and individual circumstances. Each theory is guided by its perspective and covers some issues while neglecting others. Indeed, a theory that seeks to explain everything is likely to be found wanting. We therefore do not discredit any theory, but seek to add the voice of the sociological Careership Theory to existing debates and conversations about career decision-making. Our special interest is in the public TVET college sector as we have noted an almost complete absence of literature on career decision-making by TVET students. There is, however, literature that looks at why students enrol in public TVET colleges, and also their experiences there. In addition to the original conceptualisation of the Careership Theory, this article adds other conceptual tools associated with the work of Appadurai. We do so because we acknowledge that a theory cannot remain static and that, as the social world changes, so must theories if they are to accommodate new social experiences.

KEYWORDS

Careership Theory, TVET, career decision-making, post-school students, navigational capacity

Introduction

Making a career decision is important in the lives of individuals, although it can be accompanied by difficulties (Chinyamurindi, 2016). Although research has increased in the public Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector in South Africa, not much has been conducted regarding students' career decision-making, either empirically or theoretically. Several studies on students have been conducted with different foci. For example:

- why students attend colleges from a capabilities approach (Powell, 2014; Powell & McGrath, 2014);
- the barriers to gaining access to colleges from an agency and a structure perspective (Groener & Andrews, 2019);
- what young people think about TVET (Needham & Papier, 2011);
- the perceptions and experiences of selected groups in TVET – for example, women (Matenda, 2017) and Engineering students (Sibiya & Nyembezi, 2018; Sibiya, Nyembezi & Bogopa, 2021).

Despite the evident growth and accumulation of research in TVET, the issue of career decision-making is still neglected, along with its theorisation. In order to paint a picture of the growth and development of research in TVET in South Africa, Papier and McGrath (2020) analysed the research output in TVET, with a special focus on doctoral and master's theses. They remark that, in general, research on TVET at universities has both increased and improved. Of all the theses that they reviewed, they found that a focus on students is largely absent, the greater focus being on curriculum-related matters (Papier & McGrath, 2020). This analysis shows that, although research has increased in the TVET sector, the focus on students and their career decision-making remains neglected. This study therefore sought to begin to fill this hiatus.

A focus on career decision-making research in public TVET colleges in South Africa is lacking, despite the wide body of literature on the career decisions of students in general (Shumba & Naong, 2012; McMillan, 2014; Galvaan, 2015). Considering this, the aim of this article is twofold: to introduce and explore the value of the Careership Theory in a South African public TVET college context. We acknowledge that this theory is dated and can benefit from a conceptual update. For this reason, we add the notion of navigational capacity, drawing on the work of Appadurai (2004). This notion extends Bourdieu's concept of capital to include and give prominence to the idea that aspiration can be viewed as cultural capacity. Most importantly, this notion seeks to transcend the view of culture, linked to the idea of *habitus*, as pastness (Appadurai, 2004). Although we find the sociological approach in general and the Careership Theory in particular useful in the domain of TVET research in South Africa, we do not claim that other theories are of less or no value. The purpose of this study was to determine those factors that influence career choices and aspirations among South African students.

We understand that the field of career counselling, guidance and decision-making is underpinned and guided by a wide body of competing theories. We are also aware that in this field existing theories are developed continuously to enhance their explanatory potential. The ever-growing number of theories and the continuous efforts to improve them remind us that the social world is changing; therefore, theories must evolve or be (re)invented to explain current and future circumstances. According to Hodkinson (2008), theories can be viewed as thinking tools and statements about the social world – for example, the way in which the social world works, or at least how it should work. In the following section, we briefly consider the psychological approach to career counselling, guidance and decision-making.

Dominant psychological approaches to career counselling, guidance and decision-making

It is well acknowledged that the field of career guidance, counselling and decision-making is the province of psychologists. The so-called ‘big five’ career guidance and development theories all lie within the field of psychology. They are (Leung, 2008):

- theory of work-adjustment;
- theory of vocational personalities;
- self-concept theory of career development;
- theory of circumscription and compromise;
- social cognitive career theory.

The focus of these theories is generally on the interaction between the individual and the environment (Jena & Nayak, 2020). Despite the dominance and evolution of career-development theories over the past few decades, it is argued that no single theory applies to all circumstances and individuals. In addition, a theory that is applicable and relevant now may not necessarily yield good results tomorrow because the social world changes continuously, as do careers and the career needs of individuals (Jena & Nayak, 2020). Therefore, although we present a sociological perspective in this article, we acknowledge that it is neither necessarily the best nor the only theory that can add value to our understanding of the career decision-making of students in public TVET colleges in South Africa.

Sociological perspective on career guidance and decision-making

Sociologists are interested in understanding, among other things, the distribution of the members of the population within social and economic structures (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 2006). The sociological approach takes into consideration the social structure, that is, the ways in which social agents in social fields position themselves concerning others and the way mutual expectations are developed and lived up to (Musgrave, 2017). It is acknowledged in sociology that biological factors are important for social positioning; however, social factors are considered to be stronger and more influential (Blackmore & Cooksey, 2017). Social factors are mostly those that influence, for example, who attends which type of school and

who occupies which position. Considering this, sociologists can speak of social class and inequalities, and of the social status associated with these inequalities. Educational qualifications, as symbolic as they may be, are used to sort people into different positions in society, in education and in the workplace. For instance, most wealthy parents have the advantage of being able to invest in their children's education, in this way giving them an advantage in society and in the workplace. This is one way in which class inequalities produce and reproduce themselves (Blackmore & Cooksey, 2017).

Careership Theory

This section provides a brief overview of the Careership Theory. In the South African research literature, this theory is not commonly used, although recent years have seen at least four citations of it. The first citation is by Powell (2014) in her doctoral thesis, where she simply mentions in passing that the Careership Theory is not dominant and is not well known in South Africa. The second citation is by Smith (2015), who gives more details of the theory in her theoretical discussion. The third citation, by Mtemeri (2017), mentions this as one of the theories of career guidance and development. The fourth and most recent citation is by Maluleke (2022), who uses the theory as a framework for his doctoral study. Despite the near-absence of this theory in the South African research literature, it has been used meaningfully, successfully and continuously in other contexts, such as Sweden (Lidström, Holm & Lundström, 2014; Lundahl, Lindblad, Lovén, Mårald & Svedberg, 2017; Andersson & Barker-Ruchti, 2019; Lindblad & Lundahl, 2020; Rosvall, Blomqvist & Nylén, 2020) and the United Kingdom (Hodkinson, Bowman & Colley, 2006; White, 2007; Hodkinson, 2008; Hancock, 2009; 2012). We are of the view that this theory can contribute to deepening our understanding of the career decision-making of students in public TVET colleges in South Africa. We are also of the view that, to make it even more meaningful, we should borrow from other theories, for example, that of Appadurai.

Origins of Careership Theory

The Careership Theory was developed by Hodkinson and colleagues in the United Kingdom in the 1990s (Hodkinson, Sparkes & Hodkinson, 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). It emerged from a research study that was commissioned to investigate the Youth Training Credits (YTCs) pilot programme (Hodkinson, 1995). With this programme, which was first piloted in 1991, youths were provided with financial credit that was to be used to pay for training. With this credit in hand to purchase any preferred training, the government assumed that the students would be equipped to make technically rational career decisions (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). The programme was meant to place the power of career decision-making in the hands of individual youths (McBride, 1990). Hodkinson and colleagues conducted a research study that investigated this pilot programme (Hodkinson et al., 1996).

The findings of this investigation compelled Hodkinson and colleagues to seek a unique theoretical approach (Hodkinson et al., 1996). At that time, the authors of the Careership

Theory found some explanatory advantages in the social theory of Bourdieu (1977; 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). They expanded upon concepts such as capital, field and *habitus* to enhance their Careership Theory model. Through these concepts, the authors of the Careership Theory were able to examine broader sociological questions of choice, structure and agency. This theory sought to transcend the objective–subjective dichotomy and the determinism associated with structural theorising (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

Basic tenets of Careership Theory

The Careership Theory is a sociological approach to understanding the ways in which career decisions are made rather than predicting the career choices that young people are likely to make (Hodkinson, 2008). The theory seeks to describe and understand the career decisions of young people as they are influenced by their education and training in addition to their experience outside of formal learning institutions. It also seeks to do so in a manner that respects the views of the learners while simultaneously placing their experience in a wider social and economic context. It looks at the social, economic, cultural, political and other environmental factors that influence the lives of young people and the career choices they make (Hodkinson, 2008). It rejects the notion that young people make economically rational choices, that is, that they base their career decisions on maximising utility (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). It also treats the career decisions of young people as being pragmatically rational (Ball, Maguire & Macrae, 2000) and conditioned by both environmental factors and asymmetrical power relations, by the resources or capital that young people possess and also their horizons for action (Wacquant, 2002).

The basic tenets of the Careership Theory as presented in Hodkinson et al. (1996) are:

- Decision-making is in the *habitus* (see below) of the social actor making the decision, and the decisions made are pragmatically rational, that is, they are neither irrational nor totally rational.
- Career decisions are not the sole act of the choosers (i.e. the students) but result from interactions in the field (such as the post-compulsory schooling sector), and these interactions are shaped and influenced by the resources that the actors possess (economic, social and cultural capital).
- Career decisions are embedded in the life histories of the social agents within the *routines* and *turning points* (see below) which make and are made by and dependent on previous routines and turning points.

Following Bourdieu, Hodkinson et al. (1996) applied the concept of pragmatic rationality, demonstrating that career choices are context-dependent. The same approach is found in the work of Reay, where she constantly demonstrates that the educational choices of children and parents are based on some rational calculation (Reay & Lucey, 2000; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009; Reay, 2018); however, this rationality is bound to a context. These pragmatically rational career decisions are made within routines and turning points. The

Careership Theory seeks to explain an uneven range of routine experiences combined with turning points in an individual's life (Hodkinson, 2008). 'Turning points' refer to the times when an individual's life goes through transition or change (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

During the early conceptualisation of the Careership Theory, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) identified at least three types of turning point: self-initiated, structural and forced. These are intertwined with periods of routine. A self-initiated turning point refers to a change or a transformation in one's life where the individual concerned is proactive in instigating a new life course. Structural turning points are different from self-initiated turning points in that events are determined by external structures. There are also forced turning points, where life-changing phenomena are imposed on individuals. Changes that occur in people's lives are part of life routines, and routines and turning points are not separable from one another. During the initial stages of the Careership Theory, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) identified at least five types of routine: confirmatory, contradictory, socialising, dislocating and evolutionary. These five types describe different experiences, with choices that have to be made (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997):

- Confirmatory routines resemble an experience that reinforces a career decision which has already been made.
- Contradictory routines describe an experience that undermines or contradicts the original decision made, leading to dissatisfaction with the original decision.
- Socialising routines describe the experience of confirming a career identity that was not there before.
- Dislocating routines describe living with unwanted career choices or identity, especially when the social agent is not able to make changes to their original decision.
- Evolutionary routines explain experiences where a person gradually outgrows their original career identity without any pain or contradiction (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

Yet the notions of routines and turning points have been found wanting (Allin & Humberstone, 2006; Hodkinson et al., 2006; Barham, 2013; Lundahl et al., 2017; Andersson & Barker-Rucht, 2019) and have been subjected to some revision. It is held, for instance, that it is difficult to identify a turning point within a routine and to determine the duration of a routine (Barham, 2013). Andersson and Barker-Rucht (2019) even added another turning point to the original and revised list: initiating turning point. Hodkinson (2009) suggests that the notion of turning points be shifted to 'learning', that is, learning throughout life as one constructs one's career. Nonetheless, Barham (2013) remains confident that the notion of turning points has something valuable to offer to our understanding of career decision-making.

As already mentioned, Careership theorising drew on concepts associated with Bourdieu (1984; 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) to develop a unique sociological theory about the ways in

which career decisions are made in practice (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Bourdieu developed what he called the ‘theory of practice’ as an attempt to explain social dynamics, power relations and the ways in which the social structures of society not only shape human conditions and actions but also reproduce social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1984). The central thesis of the theory of practice is that social inequalities continue because of the reproduction that emanates from the differing and unequal capitals with which different families endow their children (Riley, 2017). The notion of capital was developed to explain this.

In this sense, capital covers cultural, economic and social resources (Bourdieu, 1986); according to Riley (2017), it refers to the resources available to a social agent. Cultural capital presents itself in the form of credentials and cultural objects (Riley, 2017). It is also evident in the socialisation that gives knowledge of society to the social agent. Economic capital, as the name suggests, comes in the form of material resources that can be quantified in monetary terms or related value – for example, as income and ownership (Riley, 2017). Social capital presents itself in the form of social networks, obligations and relationships that are beneficial to social agents (Bourdieu, 1986). These concepts were not coined by Bourdieu, but came from elsewhere: for example, cultural capital is associated with Marx (Desan, 2013), and social capital is associated with Coleman (1990; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016).

The use of cultural capital as an explanatory concept has been criticised as suggesting ‘pastness’, which assumes that a cultural actor is one with their roots in the past (Appadurai, 2004). This happens when a social actor is seen as acting in accordance with their past experiences or when their social standing is associated with their past. Appadurai (2004) proposes that the use of the word ‘culture’ must consider the sophisticated nature of aspiration and the way in which it is constituted. For him, using culture to explain social action portrays social action as a reflection of one’s history or background and not of the way individuals act according to present circumstances and future aspirations.

‘Field’ is one of the concepts in Bourdieu’s trilogy of ‘capital’, ‘field’ and ‘*habitus*’. A field is likened to a game governed by certain rules, where the players come to play the game with different resources (e.g. economic, cultural and social), power and privileges (Hodkinson, 1998), and in so doing they employ different strategies (Lamaison & Bourdieu, 1986). In social fields, we can see the exchangeability of dispositions of *habitus* (Jenkins, 2002; Thomson, 2008). As in a game, social actors in a field occupy different positions which influence their actions in different ways (Thomson, 2008). The field is a space of unequal power relations that emerge from the different statuses perpetuated by different levels of capital, as well as background, influenced by the *habitus*. The differing capitals and *habitus* portray the field as an arena of competition: competing to dominate, to succeed, to accumulate capital and to maximise positions. In this way, social actors gravitate towards fields that best match their dispositions (Maton, 2008).

Habitus is another of Bourdieu’s most cited and hotly debated concepts, but also the least understood (Reay, 2004b; Maton, 2008). Bourdieu (1984) defines it as a cultural environment

that tends to be internalised in the form of dispositions to act, think, feel and perceive. It represents the subjective (internal) structure of the social actor, whereas capital and field represent the objective (external) social structure. For Bourdieu, the concept of *habitus* accounts for the agency–structure dichotomy or dualism. This dualism shows that social action is a result of both internal and external factors combined and intertwined. The actions of a social agent are not only either internally or externally influenced but they also result from both factors. As much as the body (social agent) lives in the social world, the social world also lives in the body and is inscribed in the body – embodiment. By applying the concept of *habitus*, Bourdieu attempted to gain access to the internalised perceptions, behaviours and beliefs of different social groups (Maton, 2008).

The Careership Theory scholars used *habitus* as one of the pillars of their theory to explain the ways in which young people in the YTC pilot programme made their career choices. At the centre of their approach was the idea that inequality leads to different choices and destinies among young people. A similar approach was taken by Ball and colleagues in their analysis of the inequalities in the education markets (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Ball, 2003; Reay, 2004a). A similar approach and focus are also evident in some South African studies (McMillan, 2014; Galvaan, 2015). Therefore, the Careership Theory brings to the fore the issue of inequality in education (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). It is this inequality in South African education and training with which much of the literature is attempting to grapple (Soudien, Motala & Fataar, 2012; Bydowell, 2015; Baatjes, 2018).

Careership Theory in South African TVET research

The Careership Theory has been used in a TVET context abroad (Hodkinson et al., 1996). A tiny portion of the literature on TVET in South Africa focuses on the Careership Theory to explain why students or apprentices have chosen a vocational or a technical programme at a college or elsewhere (Maluleke, 2022).

Part of the usefulness of the Careership Theory in the context of South Africa lies in the approach of the theory – for example, a focus on inequality in education. South African history reveals the formalisation of inequality and inferiority through educational and labour market exclusion. These inequalities of the past seem to be continuing in the new democratic society (NPC, 2012), even though racial discrimination is no longer the leading factor but only one among many. Despite the changes since 1994, what remains clear in South Africa is that social structures ‘play a central role in setting up individual choices about educational training, credentialing, and employment prospects’ (Babson, 2014:157).

The Careership Theory recognises structures (e.g. educational structures, processes and practices) and the relationship between social institutions (both micro and macro). In acknowledging structure, it brings sociological concerns to the question of career decision-making, particularly alertness to inequality (Hodkinson et al., 1996). In the case of South Africa, therefore, the Careership Theory can be useful in dealing with issues of inequality,

unemployment and poverty. It is also important to point out that the literature on TVET in South Africa acknowledges the effects of structure on social agents (Groener & Andrews, 2019). The most common approach to the TVET literature is the focus on structural disadvantage, which leads to youths and unemployed persons from disadvantaged backgrounds being targeted. Some of these disadvantages are evident in the descriptions of young people such as ‘youth at risk’ (Booyens & Crause, 2012:259) and those ‘not in employment, education or training’ (Cloete & Butler-Adam, 2012:3).

At the heart of the Careership Theory are pervasive social inequalities (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1993). The Careership Theory authors landed at Bourdieu’s door because his analytical concepts could, at that time, unapologetically confront the nature of inequality in the educational markets in the United Kingdom. These inequalities, created by social structures, limit the ability of human agency to navigate through social structures (Atkins, 2008; Atkins & Flint, 2015). Within these social inequalities, the theory seeks to get to grips with the structure–agency dilemma, a central feature in Bourdieu’s theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977).

The Careership Theory attempts to explain the ways in which career decisions are made in the organised structures of society (Lindblad & Lundahl, 2020). Appadurai (2004) claims that people’s actions and choices can be explained through their capacity to aspire. In this capacity to aspire, aspirations derive from cultural norms and practices. To act out their aspirations, social agents need access to cultural, economic and social capital (Golding, 2013). These aspirations move beyond individual preferences as they are formed as a consequence of an individual’s interaction with others in social fields.

It is argued that poverty smothers dreams and the process of attaining them (Ray, 2006). Poor people have aspirations and wishes, but these are socially determined and are not equally distributed (Appadurai, 2004). In addition, as much as poor people may aspire, developing strategies to achieve their aspirations remains a challenge. It is a challenge in poor communities because there is insufficient observed experience of success, and consequently the dreams and aspirations of poor people sometimes diminish in front of their eyes. But here is where Bourdieusian analysis comes to the rescue: it helps to unpack the hidden social structures that perpetuate inequality and its reproduction.

These experiences can also be analysed using the notion of the capacity to aspire, regarding whether aspirations fail or not. Appadurai (2004) would speak of failed aspirations, but Ray would speak of aspirational windows, arguing that aspirations do not fail (Genicot & Ray, 2017). In Ray’s scheme of things, aspirations are always there; the only thing that fails is the capability to pursue them. Although Ray developed his idea from Appadurai’s capacity to aspire, Ray proposed that aspirations do not fail, but that sometimes the aspiration windows are too large for social agents from low socio-economic backgrounds to negotiate, which causes frustration (Genicot & Ray, 2017). This can be linked to the notion of the horizon for action as linked to social agents’ perception (Rosvall et al., 2020), and also that of navigational capacity as it relates to the possible pathways that lead to future success (Golding, 2013).

Conclusion

The sociological approach to career decision-making is rooted in the simple logic of the relationship between capital, field and *habitus*. According to this Bourdieusian logic, career decisions take place in social fields, such as an educational field in this case. The field is characterised by social relations, which are also influenced by the capital (resources) that social actors bring into the field. This capital is distributed unequally because it depends on the economic backgrounds of families. This unequally distributed capital influences the development of *habitus*. Although the participants in this study do not resemble Bourdieu's inheritors of France in the 1970s (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979), their socio-economic status has a bearing on the manner in which they navigate through life. Their dreams and aspirations seem to be limited by what they believe is possible, given their circumstances, both past and present. They aspire to do great things in life but what lies within their horizon for action is what they focus on.

This article has made several contributions to theorising career decision-making. One of these contributions is updating the Bourdieusian perspective with more future-looking perspectives. A close relationship exists between the notion of field and that of aspirational maps (Golding, 2013). As social agents navigate through social fields, deploying their capital, their navigational capacities are strengthened because future success is built on previous success. It is here that the relationship between *habitus*, 'aspiration window' and 'capacity to aspire' meet (Golding, 2013). *Habitus* and capacity are complementary to each other because they both focus on the way social position (in a field) influences perceptions and actions (Naveed, 2021). Since *habitus* represents embodied (internalised) dispositions, it helps us to understand the way aspirations are formed and how social agents adjust these aspirations to their lived experiences (Naveed, 2021).

The article has also introduced the Careership Theory to research into the career decisions of students attending public TVET colleges in the South African context. Although the Careership Theory is foreign to this context, its stance and perspective can be applied in various contexts without harm. The theory brings with it broader sociological questions about career decision-making, a perspective that is missing in research into public TVET colleges in the country. Issues of inequality of access and opportunity in post-school education and training can be revealed through this sociological approach to career decision-making. The Careership Theory is by no means the best, but it is foremost among many theories that can paint a favourable picture of the ways in which students make career decisions.

Using this theory in the South African context would also serve to improve its credibility as it undergoes testing in a new context and in different historical periods. It is not the intention of this article to discredit other theories of career counselling, guidance and development, as we consider all of those theories to be valuable in their own right. We also concur with the argument that 'no single theory is sufficient enough to show the career progress of a person,

rather each theory advocates a certain idea and neglects the other part of individual career choice' (Jena & Nayak, 2020:23520). For this reason, writers can adopt one theory, combine theories or borrow concepts from other theories. Careership Theory is making and will continue to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the career decision-making of students in South African public TVET colleges and to the field of career guidance, counselling and development at large.

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