Exploring Career Development, Student Development, and Philosophical Theories to Inform Advising Practices

The purpose of this work is to provide a fresh perspective of the advising profession through the lens of three theories: Existentialist worldview, John Holland’s Person-Environment Fit career development theory, and Robert Kegan’s Constructive-Development Theory of the Self in order to better guide advising practice and policy. Additionally, the hope is if these particular theories do not resonate with the reader, that the work can stand as an example of how to further examine theories, identify their similarities, and leverage their interrelated strengths to inform one’s advising practice.
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Is a college education an immutable right or is college a privilege for those who qualify intellectually and financially? What is the purpose of higher education? What responsibilities do academic staff, such as advisors, have in the system as a whole? The answers to these questions should not be found outside of oneself. Of Course, the research literature, universities, colleges, and departments attempt to answer these questions for us, providing empirical evidence to why this theory or policy is better than that one, or by providing us mission statements that we have to buy into to be measured as successful. However, these imposing viewpoints can leave staff feeling disconnected and uninspired. Given the increase in data driven decision making, are staff relegated to being fleshen robots destine to peddling someone else’s’ agenda, posting overrides, recommending coursework, and approving graduation plans for our entire career? I propose that policies informed by theory and supported by empirically validated outcomes, while important, must still allow for the humanistic component of academic advising.

The purpose of this work is to provide a fresh perspective of the advising profession through the lens of three theories: Existentialist worldview, John Holland’s Person-Environment Fit career development theory, and Robert Kegan’s Constructive-Development Theory of the Self in order to better guide advising practice and policy. Additionally, the hope is if these particular theories do not resonate with the reader, that the work can stand as an example of how to further examine theories, identify their similarities, and leverage their interrelated strengths to inform one’s advising practice.
The four major themes of existentialism are death or nonbeing, freedom or responsibility, aloneness or isolation, and meaninglessness or purposelessness (Maglio, Butterfield, & Borgen, 2005). Existential themes can provide the context needed to help academic advisors frame the challenging experiences a student faces during college (Maglio et al., 2005). What makes existentialism a particularly appealing theory for academic advising is that it encompasses philosophical components focused on the human condition. First conceptualized by philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre, the focus of existentialism is the experience of existing, being, and becoming (Maglio et al., 2005). The practical focus of this theory is allowing space for the individual to construct their own purpose and meaning in life where no inherent purpose or meaning exists. In particular, the focus in on the phenomenological experience of these struggles occurring in the interchange between one’s experience and the interpretation or meanings made from this experience (Maglio et al., 2005).

DEATH & NON-BEING: Any sort of life transition contains themes of death or nonbeing at many levels. Although most people focus on the anxiety associated with the finality of the big death, there are many little deaths through which people must live such as the death of an identity or community. For example, students may struggle with no longer having the communal support of a high school sports team and the associated respect and status of being a part of the team (Maglio, Butterfield, & Borgen, 2005).

ALONENESS & ISOLATION: As individuals develop and mature, they may begin to confront the notion that we exist alone and apart from one another. Individuals grapple with feelings of isolation however have internal desires to be a part of the group, to merge, or be a piece in the greater whole. For example, a student can experience this tension when they have moved away from the family unit and the realization sets in that the family can exist and function in their absence (Maglio et al., 2005).

FREEDOM & RESPONSIBILITY: In most westernized cultures, freedom is considered to be a basic human right (Maglio et al., 2005). Existentialism argues that the idea of freedom and it’s correlates, responsibility and will, are engrained components of the human condition. Freedom and responsibility are expressed most often in the individual’s creation of self and reality. The critical tension here lies within the balance of feelings of freedom and choice with the desire to have predictability and structure. In particular, students struggle with the understanding of the consequences and responsibility of choice, often times for the first time in their life. For example, a student who refuses to choose a major may not fully comprehend the ramifications of the choice to not choose. Alternatively, a student who chooses a major too soon, may not understand how that choice has limited future options (Maglio et al., 2005).

MEANINGLESSNESS & PURPOSELESSNESS: Meaning only exists because of the relationship between self and other. The creation of meaning is a continual process of attempting to understand the world as it relates to the self. The major point of anxiety can come from trying
to project meaning into an inherently meaningless world. So why try to create meaning at all? Meaning is important because it provides the scaffolding for value systems. Students struggle with meaninglessness at various levels, for example, what is the meaning of this assignment? Why should I major in business? What is the purpose of college? These are things they struggle with and may initially look outside the self to define (Maglio Maglio et al., 2005).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING:

First and foremost, academic advisors need to support the meaning-making process. They can do this through creating a safe space where students can describe and explore both the hardships and hopes of his or her college journey. This allows for the advisor to accept the student as a whole person, rather than as only a student. In an accepting and attentive space, advisors can then guide students through the exploration of these existential themes, allowing for meanings within meanings to be uncovered and allowing the implicit can become explicit. Ultimately, by addressing the totality of the student’s experience, the advisor can honor the individual’s unique experience and ferret out natural feelings experienced during life from more troublesome psychological factors such as major depression and addiction.

SIMILARITIES & CONTRIBUTIONS:

- Provides the context needed to conceptualize human existence
- Connotes that no one person can truly understand another’s existence as each person lives in a self-actualized, self-contained world
- Treats the student as a whole human being having a human experience
Robert Kegan’s Constructive Developmental Theory of the Self builds upon the work of Piaget and Erikson (Lewis et al., 2005; Love & Guthrie, 1999). Kegan asserts that meaning making, although it has affective traits, is inherently a cognitive activity that involves physical, social, and survival actions. In Kegan’s initial 1982 work, he describes the individual’s development of meaning as a balancing and rebalancing of self and other (Lewis et al., 2005; Love & Guthrie, 1999). The benefits of this theory over other student development theories, is that it encompasses cognitive, social, and emotional development as components of the active meaning making system of the individual. This is critical in conceptualizing the student experience from a holistic perspective and taking into account the multiple identities that a student may develop over time.

**FIRST ORDER OF CONSCIOUSNESS:** Single point, immediate. Unable to conceptualize abstract thought. The focus is on physical objects as a representation of the self. Meaning is created from an ego-centric and fantasy filled point of view. Concrete thinking (Lewis et al., 2005; Love & Guthrie, 1999).

**SECOND ORDER OF CONSCIOUSNESS:** Durable categories. Develops the ability to classify objects according to their properties into durable categories. For example, not all animals are dogs and not all dogs are poodles (Lewis et al., 2005; Love & Guthrie, 1999).

**TRANSITION FROM SECOND TO THIRD ORDERS:** Most likely to occur during adolescence, however may be delayed until after entry into college. During this time, individuals will alternate between the second and third order. This process can take several months to several years to complete (Lewis et al., 2005; Love & Guthrie, 1999).

**THIRD ORDER OF CONSCIOUSNESS:** Cross-categorical thinking. Thinking extends to abstract thought and the ability to: identify complex, internal psychological aspects of the self, more fully appreciate human relationships, construct values and ideals outside of familial or cultural norms, and put one’s own interests aside (Lewis et al., 2005; Love & Guthrie, 1999).

**TRANSITION FROM THIRD TO FOURTH ORDERS:** This is the primary transition into adulthood. The individual gains the ability of self-authorship. Sometimes this transition is identified by the individual feeling life has stopped or a loss of motivation or focus. The struggle lies in separating one-self from externally imposed expectations (Lewis et al., 2005; Love & Guthrie, 1999).

**FOURTH ORDER OF CONSCIOUSNESS:** Cross-categorical constructing. Ability to construct generalizations across abstractions. A consistent identity forms by use of concrete and context-bound particulars and abstractions. “However, one-half to two-thirds of the adult population appear not to have fully reached the fourth order of consciousness (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p 72; Kegan, 1994).” Marked by the individual’s capacity to put his or her values aside and form a deeper internal set of beliefs that create a context for and regulate behavior.
FIFTH ORDER OF CONSCIOUSNESS: TRANSSYSTEM. Rare, never appears before people reach their 40’s (Kegan, 1994). Characterized by the realization of the human capacity to pretend toward completeness while actually being incomplete. Understanding we are who we are only through relation to another (Lewis et al., 2005; Love & Guthrie, 1999).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING:

Kegan asserts that in order to progress to the next order of consciousness, the student needs to be confronted with a situation where the current order of consciousness is not compatible (Love & Guthrie, 1999). Advisors can play an active role in helping students to identify opportunities that would push their limits and support the students continued development. Advisors who are aware of the signs of developmental transitions, can offer additional encouragement and support while students grapple with the anxiety and frustration associated with these shifts. During the shift from the second to the third order, advisors can help students to understand the “rules of the game” (Love & Guthrie, 1999). For example, help students to understand the behavioral expectations and individual responsibilities in order to meet the expectations of society and the institution. In particular, the transition between the third and fourth order can cause a great deal of loss and loneliness. During this time, advisors can offer additional support through: recognizing the student’s individuality and independence, acknowledging his or her personal accomplishments, and offering further guidance on the transition from college life to the working world.

SIMILARITIES & CONTRIBUTIONS:

- Provides the context needed to conceptualize the student’s developmental process while being broad enough to encompass both traditionally and nontraditionally aged students
- This theory continues to support the constructivist mindset, it is up to the student to create meaning within the context of their current order of consciousness
- Advisor continues to work within the role of guide and encourager
Holland’s career theory of Person-Environment fit, represented by the RAISEC (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional) code, is regarded as one of the most influential theories in the field of career development and vocational psychology (Foutch, McHugh, Bertoch, & Reardon, 2013; Nauta, 2010). Each individual and environmental code is represented by a combination of one to three of the six personality types and is determined by a constellation of interests, beliefs, abilities, values, and characteristics (Nauta, 2010). Holland first began publishing his work on this theory in the 1950’s, since its introduction, Holland had continued to develop and refine his work until his death in 2008. Additionally during this time, many other researchers took an interest in the work and began to test and build upon Holland’s original ideas.

ASSUMPTION 1: People can be categorized into six general personality categories: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional (Foutch, McHug, Bertoch, & Reardon, 2013)

ASSUMPTION 2: Environments can be categorized into the same six environment types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional (Foutch et al., 2013).

ASSUMPTION 3: Behavior is determined by the fit between the individual’s personality type and the type of the surrounding environment (Foutch et al., 2013).

ASSUMPTION 4: The better the fit between personality and environment, the happier and more productive the person will be (Foutch et al., 2013).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING:

There are a plethora of free resources available to academic advisors to assess their student’s RAISEC code, guide the advising conversation, and match the student with potential career and hobby options. It is important to not treat the assessments as a stand-alone intervention; rather, advisors should use the results of the assessment as talking points and to encourage the student to explore their own narrative and life purpose (McMahon, & Watson, 2012). It is critical that advisors be versed in basic career development techniques and the warning signs of depression and anxiety due to the increased possibility of negative psychological factors associated with major and career indecision (Puffer, 2011).

SIMILARITIES & CONTRIBUTIONS:

- Although the theory has been used as a prescriptive intervention, the theory remains valid in the context of a constructivist, narrative approach
- Provides the context needed to conceptualize the student as a player or influencer in the world around him or her
- An emphasis is placed on the individual creating their own meaning and life-purpose
IDENTIFY AND DEFINE YOUR OWN THEORETICAL APPROACH. It is critical to find a constellation of guiding theories that can act as the scaffolding to support your advising practice.

First, identify a philosophical, worldview theory which supports how you believe humans experience their physical and social realities and how those experiences effect cognition and behavior. Examples include: Existentialism, Theism, Naturalism, and Postmodernism.

Second, identify a student or human development theory to support your conceptualization of change over time for your population. How your worldview informs day to day life and decision making, student and human development theories can assist in narrowing the focus onto college specific issues.

Third, identify a third theory to support your work within a special population. For example, if you primarily work with students who struggle with career or major indecision, finding a career development or person-environment fit theory would be most appropriate. If you primarily work with a specific sub-population such as LGBTQA or bi-racial students, finding an identity formation theory would be most beneficial.

Finally, do your research. Read as much literature as you need to be able to thoroughly articulate your beliefs and how your theories inform your personal practice. It’s beneficial to compare and contrast your theories in order to examine both inconsistencies and similarities. To the same point, it is also helpful to compare your theories to your university, college, or department mission statement. Examining these intersections can help you see how you fit into the grater whole, define the context with which you live and work, allow for the construction of meaning in your work, and bring cohesion and purpose to your day to day life. These activities can create a sense of calling or a sense that one’s work is serving a greater good. Research supports the notion that if a person can find meaning in their work, they are more likely to have a greater sense of well-being which in turn can create a more productive, happy, and resilient worker (Hirschi, 2011).

CREATE YOUR OWN ADVISING SYLLABUS. Some institutions and colleges have a common advising syllabus, which is helpful in guiding the culture of advising in their specific units. That being said, the practice of creating your own advising syllabus can be helpful in defining your expectations of your students, what your students can expect from you, and create common ground to build the advising relationship.

First, if your unit utilizes a common syllabus, be sure to incorporate those points into your personal syllabus. Much like state versus federal governments, your own syllabus should uphold the overall goals and purpose of your unit while incorporating your personal theoretical orientation.

Find an organizational scheme that makes sense to you. Some syllabus are organized by learning objectives, others are organized by timeline. Whichever you choose, be sure it is logical and clearly defined.

A great syllabus should:

1. Orient students to the basic advising process
2. Establish standards and procedures
3. Clearly outlines what the advisor expects of the student
4. Clearly outlines what the student can expect of the advisor
5. Precisely defines the intended goals and outcomes of the advising process
6. Establishes a line of communication between student and advisor

Above all else, your syllabus should be considered a dynamic document. You should continue to test and readjust your syllabus as your practice develops. Your students will change over time, the demands placed on them will evolve, your department will go through cultural shifts, and most critically, you will transform as you gain experience and continue your own development as an advisor and human.

**TINKER WITH POLICY.** Seldom are academic advisors in a role that has substantial influence over the policies that govern them. If you are the one who creates your unit policies or if you have any influence over the governing of your unit, it’s critical to create policies that are in line with your theoretical perspective. Alternatively, if you have little to no influence over unit policies, it is helpful to examine how these policies fit into your theoretical orientation.

To this end, I propose that a good policy has three critical components. A good policy should:

1. Be informed by theoretical orientation
2. Have clearly defined purpose and outcomes
3. Have measurable outcomes

With this in mind, all current policies should be systematically reviewed and if the three components cannot be identified, the tinkering should begin. One of the biggest traps of changing policy is that all too often, positive outcomes of the original policy are lost in the well intended sweeping changes. I propose that those in the position to influence policy should first begin by defining the policy as it is in a way that is measurable, identify the faulty component, make small changes, then measure the success rate over time. Repeat these steps as necessary until a satisfactory success rate has been attained. Although this may feel like the slow road to overall improvement, it allows for closer examination of the often overlooked ancillary effects of a policy. Additionally, the slow deliberate development of the policy over time, if successful, may allow for more precise plan for effective scaling and adoption by other units.
RESOURCES

A Guide to the Subject-Object Interview: Administration and Interpretation
This book is hard to find in print, however is still used as a training manual for courses designed to train practitioners and researchers on the utilization of the Subject-Object Interview.
https://www.amazon.com/Guide-Subject-Object-Interview-Administration-Interpretation/dp/1461128803

Meaning of Life Questionnaire: MLQ
“10-item measure of the Presence of Meaning in Life, and the Search for Meaning in Life. It is free to use for educational, therapeutic, and research purposed.”
http://www.michaelfsteger.com/?page_id=13

My Next Move
“The O*NET Interest Profiler can help you find out what your interests are and how they relate to the world of work. You can find out what you like to do. The O*NET Interest Profiler helps you decide what kinds of careers you might want to explore.”
https://www.mynextmove.org/explore/ip

Strong Interest Inventory: SII
“The Strong Interest Inventory® assessment is one of the world’s most widely respected and frequently used career planning tools. It has helped both academic and business organizations develop the brightest talent and has guided thousands of individuals—from high school and college students to midcareer workers seeking a change—in their search for a rich and fulfilling career.”

University of Pennsylvania, Authentic Happiness Website
“The purpose of this website is to provide free resources where people can learn about Positive Psychology through readings, videos, research, opportunities, conferences, questionnaires with feedback and more. There is no charge for the use of this site. If you would like to take the questionnaires, you first need to register.
Positive Psychology is the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive. This field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of work, love and play.
The mission of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania is to promote research, training, education and the dissemination of positive psychology.”
https://www.authenticity.sas.upenn.edu/home


