

Thought Leader Insights

A conversation with Dr. Mark Savickas

By Jenn Long

Dr. Mark Savickas, theorist behind Career Construction Theory and creator of the Career Style Interview, currently serves as Professor and Chair Emeritus of Behavioral Sciences at Northeastern Ohio Medical University. Dr. Savickas has authored over 80 articles, 40 book chapters, five books, has made over 500 professional presentations in thirteen countries, and has earned countless awards and honors from around the world for his significant impact on the field of career development. His lifelong membership with NCDA began in 1973.

Q. From your perspective, why is it important for the field of career development to stay grounded in research and theory?

MS: From my perspective, it needs to be the other way around. Practice is always ahead of theory. Practitioners have to deal with new situations, changes in the economy, all kinds of events that are new and unexpected, and then they have to do something. Theorists come along and write about it, they theorize practice. So my perspective is that researchers and theorists must stay close to practice. If you think about the best theories that we have—Parsons was a practitioner (or social worker) who formulated a matching model, Holland built his RIASEC model on his experience as a military interviewer, Super created his rainbow when he was forced to retire at age 65 and wondered what other roles people should deal with—the theories are words and language that we need to substantiate the profession and then teach it to the next generation.

Parsons, in 1908, coined a phrase ‘vocational guidance’, and we needed that word. These words weren’t things that were discovered, they are a cultural resource that we use to form our professional identity, but they are not scientific discoveries. I prefer, and wish others would start to look at, not the essentialist term of theory or model, but discourse. When we counsel, when our members engage in practice, they are producing a disciplinary discourse—practicing words, language, techniques, and then those become theory. Theory theorizes practice, and then we have different discourses for the work that we do.

Q. What do you see as major shifts in career discourse across the past decade? What new themes do you see on the horizon? Theory and Research gaps?

MS: One of the biggest that I see is the much needed increase in attention to equity issues—social justice, multicultural competence—that has been a major shift to me over the past 10 years. NCDA leaders like David Blustein’s work around the Psychology of Working is trying to address issues that practitioners always address, but we are now talking about

it in our journals and at conferences. Another new thing to me is the interest in calling. It started two decades ago with Deborah Block and Lee Richmond talking about spirituality, and in the last decade it merged into research and talk about calling. Also, I think we’ve seen a shift dying out of words like maturity and stability, and new attention to adaptability, employability and identity.

For me, originating with David Jepsen’s NCDA presidential address where he called career a story, the narrative view of career and narrative message has been a new development. We’ve moved from logical positivism as ‘THE’ epistemology, to recognizing that it is ‘AN’ epistemology, such as social constructivism. With the gradually increased acceptance of social constructionism, we have new theories such as Krumboltz’s Happenstance, Prior and Bright’s Chaos Theory, Richard Young’s Action Theory, and Amundson and Niles’ Hope-Centered.

Q. How do you see Career Construction Theory as particularly relevant for clients facing today’s job market and career landscape?

MS: The fundamental idea is that globalization and digitalization have de-standardized and de-institutionalized the life course, so the core characteristic in American society today is individualization. The standard trajectory that was given to us—go to school, graduate, get the job, get married, have a baby—has been individualized, so now your life is a biography of choices. You have to construct your trajectory. People can’t rely on the same old story that their parents and grandparents have told, because the institutions do not support it. From career construction, what we keep focusing on to help people design life are two meta-competencies—big, big meta-competencies—identity and adaptability. Identity means helping people know their intentions and their story to shape their choices. And adaptability, knowing how to revise their story when the time comes. So we move away from maturity and decidedness, to identity and adaptability. We all need to cope with the world that we live in today.

To learn more, check-out NCDA resources including: *Ten Ideas that Changed Career Development: A Monograph to Celebrate the Centennial of the National Career Development Association* (http://ncda.org/aws/NCDA/pt/sd/news_article/82928/_self/layout_details/false) and Dr. Savickas’ Keynote from NCDA’s 100th Anniversary Conference in Boston (http://associationdatabase.com/aws/NCDA/pt/sd/news_article/78939/_PARENT/layout_details/false).