

Career Development Theory: Krumboltz Social Learning Theories

Suzy Vaile

Department of Counselor Education and Supervision, Liberty University

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Suzy Vaile, 1971

University Blvd, Lynchburg, VA 24515. Email: ssvaile@liberty.edu

Social Learning Theory Tenets and Foundations

Why do people choose a particular career or field? What factors influence that choice?

The foundation of Krumboltz's theory is built on the idea that career decisions are influenced by four main factors and these factors are intertwined and interact with each other to create opportunities for learning, self-exploration, and growth. These four factors are genetic endowment and special abilities; environmental conditions and events; instrumental and associative learning experiences; and task approach skills. One underlying theme in his career theory is the importance of embracing uncertainty. Krumboltz states that "indecision is desirable and sensible, as it allows the opportunity for clients to benefit from unplanned events" (Feller et al., 2001). This theory also illustrates how clients are influenced by behavior and cognitions/understanding when making career choices (Herbert, 2008). He also states that unplanned events are not only inevitable, but they are also desirable. As career counselors, we can help our clients see through this lens while approaching new and sometimes unplanned career opportunities.

Genetic Endowment and Special Abilities

Genetic endowment refers to the physical attributes that are unique to a person including their sex, race, and physical appearance, and these traits can influence a client's career choice and preference (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012).

Special abilities are comprised of a client's intelligence, abilities, and talents, and these special abilities may set limits on an individual's career opportunities. These skills can include, but are not limited to, intelligence, musical ability, artistic ability, and muscular coordination (Krumboltz, et al., 1976).

Environmental Conditions and Events

Many factors can influence education and occupational decision making, and they usually include factors outside the control of the individual. While some events may be planned, others may not be planned; these events are environmental factors due to human action or natural forces. Human factors that influence career decision making are social, cultural, political, or economic factors; natural forces include location of natural resources or natural disasters (Krumboltz et al., 1976).

Instrumental and Associative Learning Experiences

The third group of factors that influence career decision-making includes instrumental and association learning experiences.

Instrumental learning experiences are comprised of three components, including antecedents, behaviors, and consequences. Antecedents refer to the type of learning experience or condition that is presented. Behaviors may be obvious or subtle and may impact others, and consequences are the result of the experience. For example, if a student receives an A on an exam, they are more likely to continue studying for the class because of the result of the experience (Herbert, 2008).

Associative learning experiences occur when consequences that are positive, negative, or neutral can influence behavior. For example, if a child touches a hot stove, that is a negative experience that influences their behavior to not touch the hot stove again (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012). For clarification, the experience can be positive, negative, or neutral and influences the participant's behavior. It is often associated with negative consequences, but that is not always the case when examining associative learning experiences.

Task Approach Skills

Task approach skills refer to how a client approaches tasks and includes goal setting, values clarification, and processing how a client gathers and integrates information into decision-making. It also examines work habits, mental set, emotional responses, cognitive responses, and problem-solving skills. A client's previous experience not only influences their approach to the task, but also influences the outcome of the task (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012).

These skills all influence the client's learning experiences about themselves and about the world as they pursue a career choice. According to Krumboltz, we are influenced by our self-observation generalizations that include conclusions of self-abilities, self-interests, and self-values. Clients are also influenced by their worldview generalizations, how they see the world, and its influence on them as they navigate career options and choices. The task approach skills address cognitive and performance abilities and pre-disposed emotions, and actions illustrate how a client enters a career and includes things like applying for jobs, researching training programs, researching college and their programs, and potential advancement opportunities.

What factors influence a client's occupation and how do we identify them? One possibility is that clients are comfortable or excel at a task they perceive as similar to those included in their current occupation. Also, a client may have witnessed a role model that has successfully navigated a role in the field, or a close friend has highlighted the benefits, and those positive words/images are now associated with the occupation (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012).

Learning Experiences About Ourselves and the World

A career counselor can help clients reflect on the factors that influence their decision making, help them recognize and define their view of themselves, their view of the world, and

their approach to completing tasks that align with their interests and skills, and ultimately take actions that cultivate all of these factors (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012).

A view of self includes a client's conclusions about themselves, including their abilities, interests, and values. A career counselor will help the client identify their sense of self and where that originates and influences them.

A client's worldview encompasses their general conclusion about the world and how they are living in it. A career counselor can help a client identify an incomplete learning experience as a starting point to how that aligns with their sense of self.

Task approach skills, as described earlier, helps identify how a client approaches tasks according to their abilities and predisposed emotions, as well as how they cope and interpret their environment.

Actions are the cumulative effort that shapes career decision making for the client. Actions can include applying for a job, training programs, attending college, and career advancement (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012).

Why People Prefer a Particular Occupation

According to Krumboltz, clients succeed at tasks they believe are like those performed in a particular occupation. These tasks have been modeled for them by other members of that occupation, and they now associate a positive reaction with it. The view of self, the client worldview, the task approach skills, and the actions all shape the individual, and ultimately shape their career decision making.

Learning Theory of Career Counseling

The Learning Theory of Career Counseling (LTCC) essentially focuses on helping clients identify and embrace chance events regarding their career opportunities, while remaining curious and open to new experiences (Krumboltz et al., 1976). This theory recognizes that people are exposed to a limited range of learning experiences, indecision is a natural consequence of learning experiences, and career decisions and learning experiences are influenced by the client's interests, blocking beliefs, contradictory values, and work habits.

A career counselor can help the client normalize the indecision they are feeling while learning new skills and experiences. They can also improve the client's coping skills as they navigate the changing tasks in their work, while addressing the issues between their current career and other roles. All these collaborative tasks between the career counselor and client can help them see themselves and the world more accurately (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012).

Happenstance Learning Theory

The Happenstance Theory is based on the idea that chance events that occur in life are positive and encouraging and this mindset replaces indecision with open-mindedness. It also encourages clients who struggle with new learning experiences. The five key skills to identify when dealing with chance career opportunities are curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism, and risk-taking, and it is important as career counselors to encourage curiosity when considering career choices and also when faced with unplanned opportunities in a career opportunity (Herbert, 2008). As counselors, we have a unique opportunity to help encourage curiosity in our clients by normalizing planned happenstance for the client and looking for ways that they can see instances of it in their career journey. We can also help clients by looking for opportunities that encourage exploration and learning as they navigate career choices. Another example of our engagement as career counselors can also be by helping our clients identify chance events, while

also overcoming internal or external blocks to action for them (Herbert, 2008). Krumboltz believes that chance and certainty happen, and that indecision regarding uncertainty is okay and even expected; the incongruence of this idea can lead to a love for lifelong learning for the client (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012).

Case Study and Application

Below is a case study that will illustrate how to apply the tenets of the Krumboltz Learning Theory, and this case study is loosely based on a combination of clients that I have worked with or read about as a counselor.

Client: Nancy is a 25-year-old recent college graduate with a degree in Fine Arts.

Presenting Problem: Nancy initially wanted to pursue a career in fine arts but is now unsure about her career choices and she is feeling overwhelmed. She is passionate about her love for the field but is not sure how to look for career opportunities in this field and she feels stuck.

Counselor approach (Krumboltz LTCC)

Nancy's view of self is feeling overwhelmed; I will help establish where this feeling originates. I will also encourage her that according to Krumboltz, confusion and indecision are natural feelings, and we can look for potential learning opportunities and ways to normalize open-mindedness in the midst of those feelings.

We will explore her existing skills, her interests, and her work habits to help overcome her blocking beliefs. My goal will be to expand, prepare, and empower Nancy as she wrestles with her view of self, the world, her task approach, and actions.

Some potential interventions that might be helpful to incorporate with Nancy are finding a mentor, engaging in worksite observations, volunteering, finding study materials, and potentially engaging in job shadowing (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012). Typical counseling interventions

could include goal clarification, role playing to encourage confidence, humor, and assessments (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2012).

The hope is to help empower Nancy to feel comfortable with uncertainty, to remain curious in her learning, to be optimistic in her approach, and to be flexible and open to risk-taking as she develops the skills necessary to navigate and make the most of unplanned opportunities that arise.

Conclusion

The Krumboltz Social Learning Theory illustrates the idea that career development is a lifelong process that encourages curiosity and learning. In addition to the other listed factors, this theory emphasizes the occurrence of planned and unplanned opportunities and their role in shaping career paths. The career counseling can help encourage their clients to embrace these ideas and help empower them move towards the next step in their career journey.

References

Brown, S. D., & Lent, R. W. (2020) Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work (3rd ed). Wiley ISBN: 978-1-119-58035-5

Feller, R. W., Honaker, S. L., & Zagzebski, L. M. (2001). Theoretical voices directing the career development journey: Holland, Harris-Bowlsbey, and Krumboltz. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 49(3), 212-224.

Herbert, K. (n.d.). *Lifestyle and career development*. Lifestyleandcareerdevelopment.com.

Retrieved October 2024, from

<https://www.lifestyleandcareerdevelopment.com/2008/11/krumboltzs-social-learning-theory.html>

Krumboltz, J. D., Mitchell, A. M., & Jones, G. B. (1976). A Social Learning Theory of Career Selection. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 6(1), 71-81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001100007600600117>

Krumboltz, J. D., & Baker, R. D. (1973). Behavioral counseling for vocational decisions. *Career guidance for a new age*, 235-284.

Mitchell, K. E., Levin, A. S., & Krumboltz, J. D. (1999). Planned happenstance: Constructing career paths through intentional unplanned events. *Career Development Quarterly*, 47(3), 212-223.

References

Nayak, L. J. U. (2020). Theories of career development: An analysis. *Indian Journal of Natural Sciences*, 10(60), 23515-23523.

Niles, S. G., & Harris-Bowlsbey, J. (2012). *Career development interventions in the 21st century* (4th ed.). Pearson.

Peterson, N., & González, R. C. (2000). *The role of work in people's lives: Applied career counseling and vocational psychology*. Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.