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# Toward a relational perspective of the psychology of careers and working: A social constructionist analysis

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## Abstract

This article explores the contributions of social constructionist thought to the development of a relational approach to careers. In this article, the term “careers” is defined as encompassing the working lives of all individuals. Using a social constructionist perspective to critique existing assumptions about careers, work, and relationships, the authors develop a conceptual framework that expands the theoretical opportunities inherent in a relational approach to the study of careers. The article concludes by highlighting implications of a social constructionist analysis of a relational approach to careers for theory development, research, practice, and public policy, © 2004 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most prominent themes in recent movements to contextualize career concerns has been the exploration of the connection between interpersonal relationships and the work and career world (e.g., Blustein, 2001b; Flum, 2001a; Hall, 1996). As we propose in this article, the relational context offers career theorists and

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practitioners considerable leverage in understanding how people comprehend, construct, and act in relation to the challenges and opportunities of contemporary working experiences. A key attribute of the infusion of a contextual framework in career development has been the increased use of narratives, stories, and conversation as representations of current discourses and a means of understanding career life (e.g., Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg, & Roarke, 1997; Collin & Young, 2000; Juntunen et al., 2001). As scholars and practitioners reflect on the content of these narratives, a consistent relational theme has emerged that runs through the diverse ways in which people understand their working lives (e.g., Blustein et al., 2001; Flum, 2001b; Sennett, 1998). Another important implication of the focus on context in the study of careers is the awareness that multiple truths exist in the way in which people construct their perceptions and narratives about their working experiences. The growing appreciation of the multiplicity of psychological experience has been explored with great promise within the social constructionist perspective, which has raised fundamental questions about many existing assumptions in the social sciences (Burr, 1995; Cushman, 1995; Gergen, 1999). In short, social constructionist thought generates a critical view of a variety of traditions, questions taken-for-granted knowledge, and shakes the ground under long accepted assumptions of Western culture in general, and in the social sciences in particular.

In this article, we seek to link the emerging relational perspective of careers with an explicit discussion of social constructionism. The recent literature that has sought to understand the connections between interpersonal life and career development has tended to use a variety of epistemological perspectives, including, but not limited to social constructionism. For example, some of the research and theory, particularly emerging from the literature on attachment theory, has been framed within a positivist or post-positivist tradition (e.g., Blustein, Prezioso, & Schultheiss, 1995; O'Brien, 1996). Other contributions that have sought to expand the conceptual landscape of our understanding of work and relationships have implicitly or explicitly adopted a social constructionist perspective as a means of incorporating a wider array of voices into our thinking and practice efforts (e.g., Blustein et al., 2001; Richardson, 1993). Following the promise of recent contextually informed efforts at understanding how people engage in their working lives (e.g., Young & Collin, 1992), we use social constructionist thought to present a compelling portrayal of the relational framework that is woven throughout the career process. As such, the goal of the present article is use the social constructionist perspective as a means of understanding the complex interconnections between relationships and working.

As we propose in this contribution, social constructionism provides a powerful means of locating scholarship close to those we seek to understand. As we examine the working lives of people across time frames and cultures, we are strongly encouraged to converse with and give voice to the experiences of individuals who engage in the diverse activities, plans, and interactions that comprise a working life. In our view, moving closer to the experiences of people as they reflect on their careers will yield new insights about the intersection of relationships and work. Prior to outlining the important advances that social constructionist thinking offers a relational approach to careers, we first seek to chart the terrain of this exploration by defining

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