Culture and career psychology:
A social constructionist perspective[☆]

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the need to re-examine cultural and cross-cultural psychology with a view to re-invigorating them and placing them at the center of discourse in career psychology. One perspective that can be employed to achieve these goals is social constructionism in that it questions the centrality of post-positivism in cultural and cross-cultural career psychology and shifts the focus to people in relationships. Emphasis is placed on understanding relationships in culture and recognizing that cultures are neither static nor independent variables but central to and embedded in career psychology. Social constructionist perspectives on cross-cultural counseling in career psychology and the development of indigenous career psychologies are discussed.
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1. Introduction

Psychology's marginalization of cultural and cross-cultural psychology has its origins in an experimental psychology that was fueled by positivism. Experimental psychology focused primarily on reducing the psyche to interlocking parts rather than attempting to understand human beings in their wider relational contexts. In psychology, culture is largely seen as a nuisance variable or an independent variable that needs to be controlled through sampling so as to make way for the quest for

universal laws and theories that would be applicable for all peoples (Misra & Gergen, 1993). Cultural and cross-cultural issues in career psychology have also been marginalized, but they have the potential to play a major role in theoretical and empirical research in career psychology domains. However, both cultural and cross-cultural psychologies are firmly entrenched in and seldom deviate significantly from modernist projects. While some researchers and practitioners underscore the importance of cultural issues to better understand vocational behavior, such issues remain largely sidelined in the career literature.

Here it is argued that career psychology is cultural and that career psychologists need to infuse their work with cultural issues more than they have to date. In addition, if cross-cultural career psychology continues to follow the positivistic traditions of mainstream psychology, it will continue, in effect, to argue for cultural homogeneity rather than human diversity (Moghaddam & Studer, 1997). With this in mind, this paper will discuss how social constructionism can play a role in firmly embedding cultural and cross-cultural issues in career psychology and offer alternative approaches to mainstream research strategies.

Before discussing such approaches, it is important to describe the terms positivism, post-positivism, and social constructionism.

1.1. Positivism and post-positivism

Positivism is a paradigm that states that there is one reality that can be understood, that good science is value free, and that objectivity can be attained (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Positivism is ultimately reductionistic (i.e., that phenomena can best be understood by examining their essential components) and deterministic (i.e., that we can trace the specific causes of events) in which control and prediction feature prominently. Although post-positivism is also reductionistic and deterministic, it is a modification of positivism. Post-positivism states that while one reality exists, it can only be imperfectly understood, that objectivity remains an ideal to be attained, and that hypotheses are falsified rather than verified (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Post-positivism relies on multiple methods to capture reality, thus verification is deemed to be important. In addition, statistical methods are emphasised with a focus on evaluation criteria such as internal and external validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Like positivism, post-positivism aims to provide us ultimately with universal laws and theories.

1.2. Social constructionism

Social constructionism differs considerably from the positivistic and post-positivistic viewpoints. It cannot easily be defined and originates from and comprises various approaches. It has its origins in structuralism, post-structuralism, hermeneutics, and other traditions. It is particularly linked to Wittgenstein's (1953) critique of behaviorism and mentalism (i.e., the mental processes that people use to do and say things) in which he argued that people behave according to social conventions and that objects are not located in a person's mind but through the use of words. Language is viewed as constructive not referential. Hence language and meaning are