

Probabilities and Possibilities: The Strategic Counseling Implications of the Chaos Theory of Careers

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The chaos theory of careers emphasizes both stability and change in its account of career development. This article outlines counseling strategies derived from this emphasis in terms of convergent or probability thinking and emergent or possibility thinking. These 2 perspectives are characterized, and practical counseling strategy implications are provided. In addition, an illustrative technique example is described. The authors conclude that the challenges of modern career development demand the complementary and the interactive use of both probability and possibility thinking strategies.

Historically, career development theory and counseling practice have focused on the stable aspects of both individuals and occupations. For example, the matching models of Dawis and Lofquist (1984) or Holland (1997) are predicated on the assumption that there is sufficient stability within the characteristics of both individuals and their working environments to make such matching coherent and reasonable. More recently, however, both theorists and counselors have had to acknowledge the importance of change (Hesketh, 2001) and the reality of chance (Krumboltz & Levin, 2004) as also fundamental to the ways in which career development plays out in human experience. In this article, we endeavor to show how the application of the chaos theory perspective can be used to develop career counseling strategies to address these issues, and we provide a specific example of a technique derived from such strategies for counselors to use with clients.

The Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC)

Chaos theory emphasizes the need to consider the interactive and emergent properties of wholes or systems as a new focus for theory and research in science (Kellert, 1993). From the perspective of CTC, the objective world is understood in terms of complex dynamic systems that have a number of distinctive characteristics (Pryor & Bright, 2003a, 2003b). To acknowledge complexity is to recognize that reality, including human experience, has to be comprehended in its totality. Although there is some value in examining the parts of a complex whole, there is also the danger that the emergent properties of complex systems will be overlooked. As systems become more complex, the more likely it is that unpredicted events will begin to

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appear in the course of the functioning of the system. With respect to human experience, this means that what happens is necessarily only one of the possibilities that could have occurred. Concisely expressed, all history is contingent. The dynamic nature of chaotic systems is a consequence of the sensitivity of complex systems to change. Such initial change can result in quite disproportionate subsequent effects on the system. Chaos theorists call this *nonlinear change*. Thus, for example, a single bite from one mosquito may give people a virus that could influence their health for the rest of their life. The systemic component of chaos theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of elements that, when functioning as a system, begin to display characteristics of pattern and order (Kauffman, 1995). Chaos theory recognizes order and stability as the emergent and often synergistic properties of systems' functioning (Morowitz, 2002).

When chaos theory is applied to career development, individuals are understood as complex dynamic systems, and career can be understood as an emergent property of the interaction of individuals as systems with the rest of the world, which is also understood in terms of being multiple embedded systems (for a taxonomy of such systems refer to Patton & McMahon, 1999). The defining characteristic of chaotic systems is sensitivity to change (Lorenz, 1993)—the famous *butterfly effect*, which has seeped into popular consciousness through films such as *Sliding Doors* (Braithwaite, Horburg, Pollack, & Howitt, 1998) and *The Butterfly Effect* (Bender et al., 2004). The implication of this sensitivity to change is that complex dynamic systems are subject to *phase shifts*, points at which the system can transform, as when water freezes and becomes ice. As a consequence of the complexity of such systems, predicting such change, or phase shifts, is difficult and often impossible. As a result, chaotic systems may sometimes seem to be subject to randomness, when in fact what is being demonstrated is simply unpredictability resulting from complexity. The most familiar chaotic system is the weather. It exhibits overall patterns that are discerned as climates and seasons; however, the precise prediction of the weather conditions at a particular place at a specific time beyond a period of about 7 days becomes, at best, probabilistic and, at worst, simply chance. In a similar way, chaotic systems demonstrate order in the form of general patterns of functioning but, at the same time, may be unpredictable at any particular moment. Systems theorists have identified these general patterns of system behavior, which they have called *attractors* (Bloch, 2005; Bright & Pryor, 2005). The three traditional attractors are the *point attractor* (the system moving to a single end state), the *pendulum attractor* (the system oscillates between two extreme states), and the *torus attractor* (the system moves in a complex but regular pattern over time). Chaos theory has added to this collection the *strange attractor*, which is characterized by a complex pattern of movement from which a general sense of order emerges; yet, the system never acts in precisely the same way on any two occasions. Such systems also are sensitive to change and, as a result, the propensity for transformation remains a perpetual possibility either as a consequence of the impact of outside influences on the system or simply as a result of the complexity of the system's own functioning.

Some of the specific research evidence in support of CTC in career development includes the following studies. Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, and Earl (2005) investigated the complex array of influences on the career choices

of high school and university students. The results of this study confirmed that a wide range of different influences affect career decision making. Furthermore, chance events were frequently reported by participants as being significant in their career choices. The results were interpreted as supporting a perspective on career development that emphasizes complex dynamic systems. Bright, Pryor, and Harpham (2005) found that approximately 70% of students reported that chance events had significantly influenced their careers to date and, furthermore, that the results of their research could not be explained solely in terms of attributional style of the study's participants. Davey, Bright, Pryor, Levin, and Jensen (2005) and McKay, Bright, and Pryor (2005) attempted to measure the efficacy of career interventions that were based on chaos theory. Davey et al. found that a video-based intervention depicting some of the key tenets of CTC proved effective in creating more realistic career thinking in undergraduates. McKay et al. conducted a controlled comparison of career counseling interventions for three groups: one based on chaos theory, one on traditional trait-matching counseling, and the third being a waitlist control group. They found that clients rated the counseling based on chaos theory as highly as or more highly than the trait-matching counseling. Furthermore, career counseling approaches based on chaos theory were more effective in imbuing clients with a more realistic outlook on career development. A 1-month follow-up showed that the impact of the counseling based on chaos theory continued to be rated positively, whereas the trait-matching counseling declined in rated efficacy.

The Counseling Challenge of CTC

Recently, specific counseling techniques using the chaos perspective have been developed or adapted (Borg, Bright, & Pryor, 2006; Pryor & Bright, 2005, 2006). However, more general strategic perspectives have been lacking. Given the new realities of both order and chance and stability and change that the chaos theory seeks to integrate, a question that arises for career counselors is likely to be "What strategies could be used to introduce and use the concepts of both stability and change in our career counseling?"

Convergent and Emergent Perspectives of CTC

One way to conceptualize order and stability and chance and change is as different perspectives for decision making. Using CTC, two perspectives have been adumbrated (McKay, Bright, & Pryor, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2006). Order and stability can be characterized as a convergent perspective, whereas chance and change can be understood as an emergent perspective. The convergent perspective on career decision making focuses on seeking to identify *probable* outcome. The aim is to converge, through processes of analysis, elimination, and logic, to one or a few choice options that could most likely be implemented. The convergent decision-making perspective to identify probable options has the following characteristics:

- performing a detailed analysis
- assessing the likelihood of outcomes
- using standardized instruments
- gathering reliable information

- proceeding with caution
- studying economic and social trends
- searching for good opportunities
- making educated guesses
- weighing carefully the evidence
- incorporating rational decision making
- focusing on relatively few variables
- assuming that "irrelevant" variables will have no systematic effect
- seeking a single description of a situation
- seeking a complete description of a situation
- maximizing certainty

The emergent perspective on career decision making focuses on seeking to explore *possible* outcomes. The aim is for thinking to emerge from current self-limiting structures to make use of processes that allow more room for creativity, intuition, and openness, thus leading to new options that could be constructed or crafted into viable career choice alternatives (Amundson, 2003a). The emergent decision-making perspective focuses on possibilities and has the following characteristics:

- assuming personal responsibility
- making choices
- refusing to let fear conquer action
- maintaining positive action
- looking to the future with optimism and excitement
- searching for new and enlightening knowledge
- adopting multiple descriptions of a situation simultaneously
- recognizing and welcoming uncertainty
- working with incomplete knowledge and recognizing it will always be so
- following your curiosity
- taking risks
- learning from failure
- pursuing your passion
- listening to your intuitive self

Some Strategic Implications for Counseling of the Two Perspectives

Three major strategic counseling challenges can be identified that derive from the use of these perspectives.

Biases in estimating probability. CTC emphasizes the impact of complexity on career development. Among the consequences of complexity are the limitations on the ability to think rationally, to have complete knowledge before deciding, and to have total control over the outcomes of decisions.

Traditional career decision models have tended to overemphasize logical and rational thinking in investigating options, evaluating alternatives, and making the optimal choice. From the convergent perspective, this overemphasis can sometimes be seen in clients' overconfidence in their thinking abilities and an uncritical attitude about the accuracy, generalizability, and comprehensiveness of the information to which they have access. Counselors should be aware of the following five potential biases in estimating probability that have been noted:

- (a) *Past experiences.* If a young person had a parent who struggled with periods of unemployment, it might influence the way in which he or she approached career planning. Furthermore, Loftus and Palmer (1974) have convincingly demonstrated the constructive nature of long-term memories, indicating that a person's current state of mind influences his or her supposedly veridical memories. Savickas (1997) calls this the present informing the past.
- (b) *Social influences.* A person's ability to make accurate judgments is influenced by the opinions of others (family, friends, community members). It can be difficult to go against the crowd. Furthermore, a person's judgments become constrained by implicit and explicit stereotyping, prescriptions, and schema development (Gell-Mann, 1994).
- (c) *Starting point bias.* Probability is often adjusted as the situation unfolds. For example, incoming students might adjust their expectations for success after receiving their first set of grades. This process of adjustment can be influenced by a person's state of mind at his or her starting point (Amundson, 2003a).
- (d) *Communication errors.* Subjective probability terms such as *often*, *unlikely*, *may*, and *could* are sources of ambiguity and misunderstanding. This is particularly the case in situations in which there is a high degree of complexity. This can be a problem for counselors because they are trained to use tentative language (subjective probability) in expressing opinions about situations in which there is uncertainty (Edelman, 2002).
- (e) *Scenario complexity.* In a complex world, people are often assessing the likelihood of certain events based on the convergence of many different events. In mathematics, the calculation of probability occurs through a procedure whereby each event is independently assessed, and then the results are multiplied together. The more complex the scenario is, the lower the probability of occurrence. The impact of this added complexity is often ignored when people make their judgments (Amundson, 2003b).

Probability/possibility shifts. Because CTC integrates both order and stability and chance and change, the convergent and emergent perspectives are not viewed as competing but rather as complementary ways to understand human experience and to take purposive action. Counselors and their clients can use either or both perspectives, depending on the issue identified as germane to individuals' career development. Sometimes this may mean that decision makers need help in moving from one perspective to the other. Such shifts may need to occur in a recycling manner several times during the course of counseling at each point at which clients begin to feel "stuck" in the decision-making process.

- (a) *Indecisive clients.* Shifts in perspective might be needed when possibilities have to be refined into possible decisions and actions. This requires a "possibilities to probabilities" shift. This situation illustrates the perennial counseling problem of client indecisiveness. Indecisive clients usually do not have problems generating possibilities; their problem is choosing among alternatives. After having made a choice, the implementation of that choice and the likely strategic counseling challenges can be identified through the use of the new career decision-making perspective.

Clients' consideration of the many consequences of such choices sometimes paralyzes their ability to choose. Newell (2005) has argued that people use evidence accrual methods in decision making and that, in doing so, they vary in the amount of evidence they require before making a decision. Some clients may need to be encouraged to start developing and using the strategies of the convergent perspective. As options are gradually whittled down to several alternatives, then a further perspective shift from probabilities to possibilities may be required. At this point, clients may need to be encouraged to creatively consider in what ways several attractive options might be combined. For example, someone trying to decide between engineering and medicine could be encouraged to explore options involving the construction and development of medical technology, the safety dimensions of industrial design, or even ergonomics.

Very often, a client who seeks more information before making a decision will search externally for this information, rather than looking inward and using creativity and imagination to think through potential scenarios and their potential to meet his or her needs. Traditional job search advice (e.g., Bright, 2001) has tended to focus on external exploration of relevant labor market information (convergent perspective). The emergent perspective complements this by emphasizing the importance of developing new realities through imagination, metaphor, and creativity (e.g., Amundson, 2003a; Ibarra, 2003).

- (b) *Clients in a state of indecision.* Alternatively, counselors often have clients who are in a state of indecision. Such clients often cannot see *any* alternatives. They will frequently say that they have no options. For example, a client who has worked in middle management in a specialized manufacturing organization for the last 15 years and who has been laid off may think that his or her skills are so narrow that no one else would want to employ him or her, especially after having submitted 20 or 30 job applications and not receiving any job offers. Such clients need to be encouraged to engage in a convergent to divergent perspective shift and to start using "possibilities" thinking to explore, discover, and create possibilities to consider, refine, restructure, and combine. Preoccupations (Savickas, 1997) and "sweet spots" (i.e., the intersection of a person's uniqueness, purposes, and capacities; Lucado, 2005) may need to be identified and explored. Meaning, purpose, and passion may need to be reviewed and deeply thought through (Pryor & Bright, 2004). For example, if the unemployed manufacturing manager of our example decided, as a consequence of this change of perspective, to initiate a major life transition (called a *phase shift* in CTC), then this might in turn require an emergent to convergent perspective shift as the manager endeavored to decide on the new location for the family and the training course required to become, for example, a library technician.

Convergent and emergent perspective change. A chaos theory conceptualization of reality posits change as an integral component of the way systems function. Change often restructures the dynamics of systems. Such change can be abrupt or gradual, linear or nonlinear, planned or unplanned. In fact, most humans experience all these types of change

in every conceivable combination during their life. Most career counseling is about change (Amundson, 2003a). Therefore, career counselors are in the business of encouraging appropriate, helpful, and positive change for their clients. Using convergent and divergent perspectives on career decision making, four possible change strategies can be outlined in terms of the kind of issues that counselors might want to stimulate their clients to explore. In Appendix A, we have provided a list of the issues and also some of the questions that counselors can use to stimulate such discussion.

Furthermore, although this article focuses primarily on career development counseling strategies, we thought it would assist counselors if we provided an example of a specific counseling technique that illustrates how a client's possibility thinking might be encouraged. This technique can be used to generate new alternatives to an option already being considered. It may also be useful for contingency planning by assisting clients to think about the most probable unplanned events and how they might need to respond to them. (See Appendix B for the description of this counseling technique.)

Conclusion

Traditional career counseling for decision making has tended to teach decision-making skills, which it is hoped would allow the client to generalize from the specific situation to future decisions conceptualized as more or less similar to the current one. Typically this type of career counseling included matching characteristics of the individual with those of the environment or occupation, generating alternatives, weighing alternatives according to these criteria and personal values, evaluating the generated options in a rational way, and then choosing and committing to the most preferable and viable career option and its implementation. Such an approach views each decision maker as a kind of "vocational Sherlock Holmes." Holmes was the master detective who, through the application of rigorous deductive reasoning, was able to eliminate successive potential suspects until the true perpetrator of the felony was discovered. In the world of Sherlock Holmes, all the information required to make the right decision is "out there" waiting to be discovered, and one merely needs to apply acute observation and irrefutable logic to solve the problem. However, no matter how attractive the murder mystery genre is in popular sentiment, unfortunately the real world has a curious habit of being messier and less consistent, and in such a world, the available information tends to be more partial and inconsistent.

Using CTC as a theoretical framework in this article, we are arguing for a broader career development process that includes both probability and possibility thinking. Improving career decision making for individuals requires flexibility, including the need to view the decision-making process from two complementary perspectives: the convergent and the divergent. In our exploration, we have included some examples of concrete counseling strategies that can be used in various situations. The current age craves freedom of choice regarding one's life. Western societies, in particular, have been founded on concepts of individual freedom. Postmodernism has presented career counselors with many choices for 21st-century approaches to career development. Providing clients

with opportunity without strategy will lead to frustration and guilt. However, opportunity combined with the strategies of probability and possibility thinking can lead to innovation, personal meaning, original contribution, and career fulfillment for clients. As William Arthur Ward (1970) said, "a true friend knows your weaknesses but shows you your strengths; feels your fears but fortifies your faith; sees your anxieties but frees your spirit; recognizes your disabilities but emphasizes your possibilities" (p. 42).

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APPENDIX A

Four Strategies to Stimulate Clients' Perspective Change

1. Beating the Odds

Counseling Issues and Questions: Can you describe some of the ways that people "beat the odds" when facing challenging situations? How is it that they are able to overcome what seem to be insurmountable odds? Can you think of any times in your past when your efforts have "beaten the odds" in accomplishing something? What could you learn from that experience?

2. Improving the Odds

Counseling Issues and Questions: Can you describe some of the ways that people "improve their odds" when facing challenging situations? How is it that they are able to position themselves in a way that makes for a greater likelihood of success? Can you think of any times in your past when your efforts have "improved the odds" of something you wanted to happen? What could you learn from that experience?

3. More Than Chance

Counseling Issues and Questions: Can you describe some situations in which people focus too much on "luck" and do not recognize their own part in influencing life and career events? How could they become more aware of their own capacity and also learn to use these strategies in a systematic fashion? Can you think of any times in your past when you have relied on luck or blamed circumstances when you could have taken positive action but did not? What could you learn from that experience?

4. Becoming Realistic

Counseling Issues and Questions: Can you think of times when people are unrealistic about possibilities? What are some of the ways that they could become more realistic about their options? Can you think of any times in your past when you have totally overestimated or underestimated the possibilities of something happening? What could you learn from that experience?

APPENDIX B

Possibility Thinking Example: The "Wotif" Exercise

This exercise is designed to encourage students who are already considering a particular vocational option (Plan A) to develop Plans B, C, and D—that is, alternative options or contingency plans in case circumstances dictate that their original goal becomes unfeasible. "Wotif" stands for "What if," as in "What if the sky fell in?" or "What if you got better grades than expected?"

Procedure: Introduce the exercise with a discussion of "Unplanned Events in Careers." Start by citing Bright, Pryor, and Harpham (2005), who reported that around 70% of young people said that an unplanned event had significantly influenced their career plans.

If in a group setting, ask students to suggest chance events that could influence a career (or that have influenced either their own life or the life of people they know or know about). Record these suggestions on a whiteboard using a mind mapping technique (see Figure B1).

If the students fail to generate many examples, try these prompts (the percentages refer to the proportion of young people who report these types of chance events and are the results of research by Bright et al., 2005): a personal or work relationship (44%), previous work or social experiences (60%), barriers to your previous career plan (36%), an injury or health problem (11%), unintended exposure to a type of work or activity that you found interesting (43%), unintended exposure to a type of work or activity that you did not enjoy (33%), a major change of residence over which you had little or no control (11%), or any other unplanned event (10%).

When a list has been generated, ask the students if they have any personal experience of any of those events. If so, ask them what happened in the aftermath of the event. What did they learn from the event?

Step 1. Get each student to identify a personal career goal. If they cannot do this, suggest an example, such as "I want a sales traineeship," "I want to study commerce at a university," or "I want to start an apprenticeship in plumbing or hairdressing."

Step 2. Now ask the students to think "What if _____?" and fill in the blank with one of the chance events previously generated.

Step 3. Then ask them the following:

- A. How would things be changed as a result of this event?
- B. What other career goals could be achieved given that this change occurred?
- C. How could such alternative goals be pursued and implemented?

Repeat Steps 1, 2, and 3 to generate Plans B, C, and D as ways to practice dealing with unpredictability.

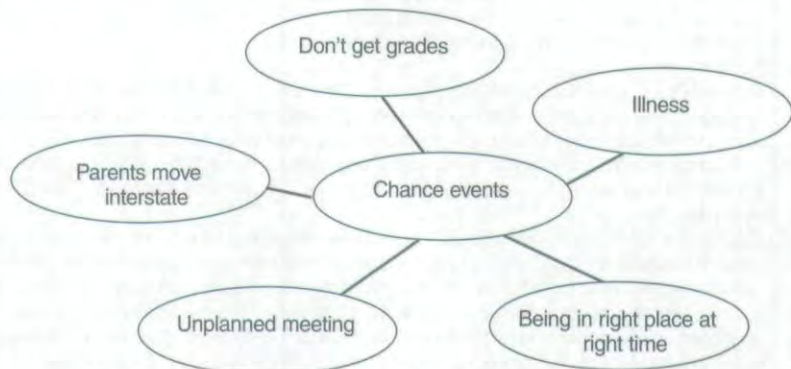


FIGURE B1
A Mind Map of Chance Events

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