
Contextual Action Theory in Career Counselling: Some Misunderstood Issues

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ABSTRACT

This article presents some of the important implications of action theory for counselling. The discussion is premised on the fact that many counsellors may avoid action approaches because of misunderstandings that have arisen in previous conceptualizations and understandings of action. Twelve misunderstandings are addressed in conceptual, methodological and counselling areas. Overall, action theory is presented as a highly suitable perspective for understanding human behaviour and for counselling as it is based on a wide spectrum of research as well as using a language that is close to human experience.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article discute des implications de la théorie de l'action dans le domaine du counseling. Cette réflexion se base sur le fait que plusieurs conseillers ne veulent pas utiliser les approches s'inspirant des théories de l'action parce que la compréhension qu'ils en ont reste attachée à des conceptions antérieures. Douze points relevant de certaines incompréhensions sont soulevés et discutés sur le plan de la conceptualisation, de la méthode et de la pratique professionnelle. Fondée sur un large corpus de recherches, la théorie de l'action utilise un langage qui se tient proche de l'expérience humaine ; cette théorie est donc proposée en tant que perspective utile à la compréhension du comportement humain et à la pratique du counseling.

Counselling, like some other client-centred disciplines, such as medicine, has suffered from the separate development of practice and theory, of systems of practical procedures and skills and how these are institutionalized. The insightful and helpful approaches of experienced practitioners and the excellent and stringent nomothetic results of researchers are, on occasion, strange bedfellows. Practitioners often complain about the difficulty and meaninglessness in integrating existing research into their daily practice. Researchers are often bewildered if asked to publish practitioners' experiential reports of their work as a contribution to knowledge. Savickas and Walsh (1996) address this issue excellently in their introduction to the informative edited volume on the topic of theory and practice in career counselling. It is not a coincidence that in attempting to address the gaps and lags between theory and practice, Collin and Young (1986) called for a new paradigm for the conceptualization of career counselling.

One of the approaches that addresses these gaps and lags between theory and practice deals with goal-directed processes. The theories of Krumboltz (1979),

Gottfredson (1981), Peterson, Sampson, and Reardon (1991), Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), Brown (1995), to name but a few, underline the notion of goals in the process of career choice and development. These theories have substantial implications for counselling. In counselling theory the concepts *goal* and *goal-directedness* are not used in the same way as in counselling practice. Goal and goal-directedness are not novel concepts in career counselling. The assumption of a significant vocational decision, that is, a goal, and taking action toward that goal, that is goal-directedness, are present in nearly all approaches. However, for a long time, the notion of goal was not accepted as a stringent concept in counselling theories. It was considered to refer to the *what* but not the *why* of career decision and, consequently not seen as very helpful in counselling (see Brown & Brooks, 1996). Later, as the concept of goal became more established and credible, attention turned to both its subconscious and non-rational processes (Phillips, 1997) and the notion of attractors — a goal-like order being built from the 'bottom up' (Vallacher & Nowak, 1997).

Our contextual goal-directed action approach (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996) provides a solution to many of these problems while avoiding the pitfalls of others. It responds to the call for a comprehensive theory of career processes (Savickas, 2001). It integrates the concept of goal without being too rational, the concept of cognitive-emotional processing without subscribing to the information-processing approach, and the concept of habitual or automatic movement, responses or impulses without relying too much on physiological or unconscious processes which we recognize can be assessed through emotions and cognitions. Our goal-directed action approach also integrates social meaning and systematic observation. Finally, it deals with goals and actions without being individualistic.

The action-theoretical approach that refers to the concept of goal-directed action has been addressed broadly in the last 20 years (e.g., Bandura, 1982; Boesch, 1991; Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1990). It has been described in detail by von Cranach and Harré (1982), von Cranach and Valach (1986), Valach (1990), Young and his co-workers (Young, Valach, Dillabough, Dover, & Matthes, 1994), Young and Valach (1996, 2000), and Young, Valach and Collin (1996). Based on the role social representation plays in our actions, action theory systematically integrates everyday thinking and professional conceptualization and provides a means for linking counselling practice and counselling research.

The contextual action theory approach (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996) is an integrative conceptualization for practical purposes. It may not possess some of the glamorous features of the strictly purist propositions of well delineated theories. It is not composed of a handful of propositions. Rather it is a complex system of reasoning, basic statements, explicated assumptions, methodological postulates, and prescriptions for practice. It has a well-described image of the person and a conception of psychology. It also incorporates the goals of the researchers and practitioners. This approach is rooted in many psychological and social psychological traditions and informed by sociological literature (see below).

Contemporary neuropsychological research also supports this conceptualization (Brown & Jahanshahi, 1996; Desmurget, Pelisson, Rossetti, & Prablanc, 1998; Jahanshahi & Frith, 1998; Jeannerod, 1994). Many propositions in action theory go back to the symbolic interactionism of Mead (1913, 1934), Goffman (1961, 1963, 1969) and others, and there are propositions inspired by the phenomenology of Schuetz (1932), Husserl (1970) and Ricoeur (1975, 1981). Action theory borrows concepts and ideas from systems theories ranging from von Bertalanffy (1971) to Vallacher and Nowak (1997). Activity theories ranging from Vygotsky (1962, 1978) to Wertsch (1998) are equally important as some of the ideas of the philosophy of language and writing on intention and meaning of Austin (1975), Searle (1969), Wittgenstein (1953), Putnam (1975) and others. We are obligated to the ecological school (Barker & Wright, 1951; Barker, 1963) as well as to the writings of Lewin (1935, 1951), Birdwistle (1973) and Kendon (1971). Early cognitive psychologists such as Neisser (1967) influenced our thinking as did psychologists writing on emotions, from Arnold (1960) to Leventhal (1984) and Averill (1980). Work on intentionality and project has also been significant (Drolet, 1995; Boutinet, 1995; Riverin-Simard, 1998). The social psychology of group, sociological theories of careers, and neuropsychological theories of motor action as well as narrative approaches, constructivist theories, contextual and perspectival views and the biographical approach have all contributed to this approach.

Notwithstanding this background, or even because of it, some counsellors may reject action theory because of its unfamiliarity or because of misunderstanding its emphasis on goals and goal-directedness. Although we described our contextual action theory approach to career development and counselling elsewhere (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996), some propositions, related to common sense and everyday understanding, can be used in a way that does not adequately or accurately represent action theory. This article illustrates that goal-directedness, the key issue in action theory, is often not properly understood. As a result, action theory is often criticized for faults it does not have but that are projected on it by its critics. How counsellors understand goals and goal-directedness is critical to their use of these constructs in counselling. If counsellors avoid or abandon these salient constructs as well as action theory generally because they are not well understood, an important means of connecting with the experience of clients will be lost.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Misunderstanding 1 — There is a mono causal relationship between goals and behaviour: Goals cause behaviour.

One of the misunderstandings often encountered by counsellors is the role of goals in the explanation of behaviour (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Karoly, 1999). Although goal is an important concept as the research on planned behaviour

indicates (Ajzen, 1991), contextual action theory does not suggest a causal explanation of consequent behaviour based on the person's goals established in advance. Rather, goals are considered as key cognitions that are assumed in defining meaningful units of behaviour (Vallacher & Wenger 1985; von Cranach & Valach, 1984). People readily relate to goals and use them to direct their own behaviour (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). *Goal* is also a concept that can be used in scientific research and systematic observation. Notwithstanding these understandings and uses of *goal*, it is the concept of *intention* that helped to realize the paradigm shift, that is from seeing human beings as behaving reactively to seeing them as engaged in proactive actions (also see Drolet, 1995). This shift resulted in the model of intentional action that replaced the stimulus-response approach. Contextual action theory contains a series of concepts through which ongoing action can be systematically organized. Relying on the theory of goal-directed action (von Cranach, Kalbermatten, Indermuehle, & Gubler, 1982), we postulate several levels of action for short-term action, mid-term projects, and long-term careers (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996). First, at the goal level, there are end states, and processes through which one strives for them. The actor can access this level as he or she engages in the action. Secondly, there is the level of automatic and semi-automatic movements in an action, project and career. Finally, these levels of goals and automatic and semi-automatic movements are mediated by the level of conscious processes, best described in functional terms in reference to goals. Thus, goal is a core concept in an action theoretical conceptualization, but the description, understanding and explanation of an action requires much more than collecting information on underlying, unspecific goals.

Misunderstanding 2 — Actions can be equated or identified simply with goals.

Goals present just one dimension or level of action. Actions are systems, goals are used to identify the unit of action. Action has other dimensions that need to be considered even if the goal is known. Knowing the goal of an action is an important step in understanding the action but it does not deliver detailed information about other aspects of the action. The premeditated goal of an action and the goal that is salient within the action are not necessarily the same. We need to know whether and how the goal of an action is embedded in projects and career, how the action is organized in reference to this goal and performed in terms of movements and contexts. The subjective view of the actor, the 'social' view of others, and our professional systematic observation provide us with necessary information reaching well beyond the information about the relevant goal itself.

Misunderstanding 3 — Actions are steered or directed only by rational and calculated goals.

Some goals often are not even reasonable. Epstein (1985, 1994) proposed that everyday actions are performed in an "experiential modality" that is far from

rational. In our understanding, goals are imagined, striven-for end states or processes for which cognitions are accessible to us during ongoing action, project, and career. Counsellors readily recognize that certain cognitions possess decisive qualities during an action. These cognitions need to be available to the individual during an action. Counsellors can easily distinguish between occasions when clients talk about their lives (a reporting modality) and when they actualize key emotional and cognitive processes, in that they recognize when a client is talking about a specific goal or acting upon a specific goal. For example, executing the goal of moving one's finger is preceded by brain activity before the awareness of the goal is reported (Libet, 1985) can only suggest that motor behaviour at this level of action is only seldom steered by conscious cognition of a goal. A client's rational description in a counselling session of what she is going to do later will not necessarily persuade the counsellor that she is really going to do what she said she would. However, if some conditions are fulfilled, the counsellor will assume that client's ideas about a desirable future are becoming operational. These conditions include the counsellor seeing that the client's description has features of a longer-term project that is being realized in actions, that this project fits into the client's other projects, such as her identity projects, and is monitored in a positive way, and that these processes can be actualized in a session.

Misunderstanding 4 — Preset long-term goals are all that is needed to keep people motivated.

At the other end of the spectrum, that is, in mid-term projects and long-term careers, counsellors and others are confronted with the relevance of goals and goal-directed systems. Consider, for example, parents who believe that their adolescent children will be highly motivated and focused if they had clear educational or occupational goals. Some authors using the concepts of goal and actions assumed that development can be fostered by following preset long-term individual goals. The notion of goal-directedness in the development literature was refreshing (Havinghurst, 1952). Furthermore, it inspired important research on agency, control and empowerment (Heckhausen, 1999). However, this research was often a short cut that overemphasized individual goals, control and actions. It also did not clearly recognize the differences between a short-term action and a life goal. The same could be observed in reference to project, such as in personal projects (Little, 1983). We suggest that actions, projects and career are built in hierarchically organized systems of sub ordination and super ordination. The relationships between life goals, projects and actions are very complex. Such complexity results in inconsistencies with which we all are very familiar. For example, the project of stopping smoking but lighting a cigarette, the project of losing weight but enjoying another unhealthy, rich snack, the project of becoming a regular morning jogger but abandoning the idea with the first morning drizzle. These common experiences lead some researchers to doubt the idea of volitional control of action altogether (e.g., Park, 1999). Our proposition is that what makes goals attractive and what keeps us motivated is that they are part of

goal-directed systems. Particular goal directed systems, such as those related to vocational issues, should be integrated with other, personally relevant or identity goal systems to make motivation operational. Some of the examples from the paragraph above apply here as well. It is the integration of long, medium and short-term goals, and other goal directed systems, that makes this motivation work. Another important issue pertinent to motivation is that the participation in these long-term goals must be socially embedded (see below).

Misunderstanding 5 — Goal-directed behaviour is an individual phenomenon.

When maintaining that individuals are better off when pursuing purposeful activities and goals, one often assumes that goal-directed behaviour is individual (see Cochran & Laub, 1994). It is the individual who should be empowered to develop clear goals and to set and follow them. Although our approach is rooted in the theory of goal-directed action of individuals in interactive settings (von Cranach, Kalbermatten, Indermuehle, & Gugler 1982), the theory of group action and joint goal-directed processes plays a significant role (von Cranach, Ochsenein, & Valach, 1986). Joint processes refer particularly to projects and careers (Valach, 1990; Valach, Young, & Lynam, 1996). They consist of processes at individual and group level and in projects and careers there are both individual and group goals. At the group level, there is information processing, such as communication while at the individual level, there are cognitive-emotional processes.

Joint processes are not necessarily consensual processes as far as the aim of the participating individuals is concerned. Conflicts are also joint processes. In a classic example, Bruner (1976, 1990) observed that mothers behave as if their infants' behaviour was goal directed. This example illustrates a form of joint goal-directed action where conscious goals may be accessible in a linguistically codified form by just one of the participants. Although the theory of goal-directed action at group level does not focus at the structural features of the acting bodies, that is, the group, it is obvious that these must be organized in such a way to allow for changes in steering and other processes in order to preserve the long-term goal directed orientation.

The most common forms of goal-directed processes are joint processes. A counsellor looks not only at whether clients know which way they would like to go in their lives, but also whether they participate in on-going goal-directed projects and whether they have access to people with whom they can develop joint projects, building upon the supportive commitments of these people.

Finally, assessing how the client organizes and performs goal-directed actions with others is important. The assumption of joint goal-directed processes allows us to alter what was previously thought of as deterministic social structure factors. Now we can think of them as joint constructed and agentic processes. In this model, the counsellor can work towards improved social participation of clients and can also define their work with clients in these participative processes related to the client's problematic issues.

Misunderstanding 6 — Goals precede actions, projects and careers.

The counsellor must be aware that following an action theoretical stance does not mean just working in a reflective modality on goals as pre-planned desirable ends of action. Goals are not reasons and considerations developed well in advance of actions, projects or careers. Rather, goals are action-accompanying processes. Obviously, goals rely heavily on one's consideration before the action, but the execution of an action depends on goals that emerge within it and not just on prior goals. 'Talking about a goal' is not the same as 'having a goal.' We also distinguish between task and goal. A task is what should be done — what I think needs doing, what I have been told or asked to do. In contrast, a goal is part of the action or project itself. Some New Year's Eve resolutions such as those related to smoking cessation — becoming a non-smoker through engaging in compensatory practices such as learning to relax, to concentrate, to feel socially comfortable without a cigarette are tasks. They could become goals. But, just saying I want to stop smoking this year at a New Year's Eve party cannot be considered as having a goal. When I perform an action, the goal becomes operational. To the extent that goals are complex and represent several actions over time, as would be the case in smoking cessation, they can become project goals. This is the very important and complex 'task-to-project transformation.' Helping clients with this transformation is a significant part of counselling.

Misunderstanding 7 — Goals are primarily reflective.

Although there are differences between an action goal and a project goal from the action theoretical view (Valach, Young, & Lynam, 1996), pursuing either type of goal is not an armchair activity, whether these goals refer to five minutes of garden work or a life project. Although both goals can be considered in an armchair, the goal for the action in the garden as well as for a life project of pursuing sailing and becoming a competent sailor will deploy different processes than reflecting on them in an armchair. For the garden work, whether the goal is relevant will be determined during the action. For the life project, the relevant goal will be supported by other processes such as its embeddedness in other personal projects or by rigorous external control. Thus, we can say that, in a sense, pre-action goal considerations are reflections. However, it is important to recognize that goals emerge in actions and projects themselves.

Counsellors need to be able to determine whether the client's declared goals are anchored in action. They also need to be aware of whether the client's goals refer to short-term action, project, or career. This enables them to determine whether the reference to a goal is just a reflection upon a goal or whether it is action- or project-relevant goal cognition. The difference between a reflection on a goal and a goal-cognition that is relevant to a project is well illustrated in interviews with persons following an attempted suicide (Michel & Valach, 1997). In this study, the patient has certain goals to engage in particular actions when interviewed by the clinician following a suicide attempt. These goals, however,

cannot be identified with the patient's contemplating a goal to engage in a life-maintaining project and disengaging from a life terminating project. This issue is an important conceptual consideration with significant methodological consequences. If we assume that people set goals and then execute the appropriate action then we can ask them about the goal for the appropriate action and they can deal with this question in a reflective manner. However, if we assume that goals are part of action and that reflections on the goal cognition do not just mirror this goal but are actions on their own, we have to search for means of how to monitor goal cognition in the course of an action. This view does not ask for assumptions of strong realism. We work with constructivists assumptions but consider the contexts of the construction processes as relevant.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Misunderstanding 8 — Research on goal-directed action in counselling is limited to traditional methods.

Research on counselling is complex and multifaceted. The increased use of qualitative methods and the development of more sophisticated statistical procedures are indicative of this complexity (Young & Borgen, 1990). Although some researchers have used goal concepts within their traditional research (e.g., Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), the conceptualization of both goal-directed systems in action, project and career and the organization levels within these systems allow for and require a broad span of methodological approaches (Valach, 1990; Young et al., 1994). Long-term career records and the monitoring of neuropsychological and psychophysical processes can be integrated within an action theoretical methodology. However, it is important that the methods are related to the appropriate conceptualization. Thus, empirical research at all levels of goal-directed systems is possible, but it will make sense only if the researcher employs suitable methods. Although many researchers informed by action theories use qualitative methods, neither the strong division between qualitative and quantitative research methods nor the exclusion of quantitative methods is inherent to action theoretical thinking. However, there are certain assumptions about the architecture of goal-directed processes that cannot be replaced by assumptions of the architecture of statistical modelling. Similarly, the statistical conception of causality is only of limited value within a systemic organisation where the units of observation at different levels of the organisation represent different measurement levels.

The analysis of experiential processing in action, project and career needs further elaboration. One such analysis is the action-project methodology developed by Young and his co-workers (Young et al., 2001). Recording ongoing processes, collecting data on accompanying thoughts and emotions (Young et al., 1994; Valach 1990), gathering social cognitions and social representation as used in the description of ongoing processes (Valach, von Cranach, & Kalbermatten, 1987), but also collecting narratives (Young & Collin, 1992) are some procedures we

have used. This analysis of experiential processing in action, project and career is a good example of the empirical operating in the experiential systems that, in turn, provides usable knowledge for counselling. The implication is that a questionnaire on future intentions may miss the target processes as much as would relying on narratives as the only source of data. If data on subjective processes within an action are required, they should be collected as close to the action in question as possible. If this implies memory processes, contemporary professional knowledge on remembering must be adhered to. If we are dealing with ongoing constructivist processes, the latest research results on these processes must be a part of the method. Finally, the contextual action theory-based methodology also requires systematic observation in counselling.

The saying 'actions speak louder than words' reflects the importance of observation in action theory research. Action theory research and practice are interested in manifest action, that is what the person or client actually does, in the cognitions and emotions that steer these actions, and in the sense the client makes of them. The stories counsellors listen to, which are very valuable, can be seen from one or more of these perspectives. In more formal language, the counsellor has to know the reference system to which the information he or she hears is related. This reference system may differ depending on the content of what is being said, or on the ongoing action process. This is particularly the case in research on counselling. Part of the challenge of counselling is to change rhetoric into action, that is, doing what is said and making the narratives a part of project or career-related ongoing processes. Similarly, stories indicate a personal or social order that will not be revealed if a series of questions is posed. The social representation of a particular cultural group is only the counsellor's or researcher's guess if the cultural group is not systematically studied. It is preferable to ask members of specific communication communities to describe their ongoing processes instead of asking them to explain events. In describing ongoing processes, they will use socially and personally meaningful concepts of action at various complexity levels.

COUNSELLING ISSUES

Misunderstanding 9 — Client reasoning and emotional experience are sufficient to engender change.

In counselling, the conceptualization of joint or group action, project and career in the everyday lives of clients is crucial for implementing goal-directed thinking. The vision of an empowered client who freely decides among alternatives is a lonely one if the only means we possess as counsellors is to rely on the client's reasoning and emotional experience. In contrast, we propose that the client and counsellor jointly constructing change-launching projects may prove to be the key issue in counselling. Counsellors realize that changes cannot be induced just by altering rational knowledge or behaviour disposition, or by environmental manipulation. Rather, the counsellor has to engage, together with the

client, in a joint process such as a project in which the client can develop and set the roots for future changes. In pursuing a joint project in counselling, the client has the opportunity to develop and practice pertinent actions. The project can also be the basis for a new career or a career change. Building a relationship with a client will not be an issue of celebrating the client or satisfying the client's desires in order to make him/her more susceptible to counsellor's manipulation. It is joining in the client's relevant projects that allows the counsellor to invest his/her skills and knowledge in these projects.

The understanding of the short-, mid-, and long-term individual and group goal-directed systemic processes as action, project and career (see also Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996) helps the counsellor to undertake the necessary steps in counselling. The counsellor can monitor the client's central and emotionally anchored self-related projects and careers. Partners outside of counselling are likely to contribute to these projects and careers. As the counsellor is able to repeatedly respond to the client's goals, the counsellor becomes more accepted by the client for the future collaboration. In helping the clients reach their goals, such as receiving recognition, the counsellor will be accepted by clients to join them in pursuing vocational goals. Counsellors will also be more credible when they propose and help to realize corrective changes. In counselling informed by action theory, goals are not solely talked about, they are worked on. This requires that all levels of these goal-directed systems be addressed and targeted within an action. The counsellor in action theoretical counselling neither overlooks emotions or subconscious processes nor is he or she reluctant to work with semi-automatically performed units of behaviour. In our example the counsellor, is interested in goals, movements, and vocal features in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the client and also to join him or her at different levels of the action organisation. However, the counsellor always sees these in the frame of the individual or joint goal directed action systems, projects and career.

Misunderstanding 10 — Personality is sufficient to explain change in counselling.

Many recent approaches to personality conceptualize personality processes in terms of goal-directed action (e.g., Cantor & Zirkel, 1990). Counsellors informed by action theory do not ignore personality issues, but will understand them in terms of clients' self-related projects and career as well as the actions they may experience in the counselling session. The relationship between a client's self-related projects and the actual interactive action of the client is complex. Clients do not act in relation to their salient goals in all cases. In certain cases, the complexity of this relationship is known as an interactive disturbance from the perspective of personality disorders. In contemporary conceptualization, personality disorders are viewed as interactive disorders (Benjamin, 1996). These manifest themselves as clients act against their most salient goals and try to satisfy their identity-related goals that become threatened through actualization of an anxiety-loaded perceptual cognition. Counsellors may experience clients who

act against their current and salient goals in an interaction as being “difficult.” Clients manifest themselves as difficult in counselling because, for some reason, they feel that the interaction will be unsuccessful. They feel they may be hurt and their identity-related goals, such as being respected as an autonomous person, will not be satisfied. Clients assume that such action is functional for their purpose. Thus, counsellors do not have to see their clients’ behaviour as an expression of personality dispositions nor do they have to avoid the notion of personality. On the contrary, as personality theories increasingly use the notion of goal-directedness in their process models, counsellors working with action theoretical assumptions can expand this thinking into the personality theorizing.

Misunderstanding 11 — All of the client’s goals are available for reflection.

Counsellors, informed by action theory, will not assume that clients can reflect on all of their goals, although they can be consciously accessible. Neither will counsellors maintain that clients are fully conscious of the relationships among various actions, projects, and career, that they are well reflected upon, and thoughtfully balanced. Counsellors will also approach clients with the full knowledge that everyday thinking is based on goals and action. Thus, in counselling it is not so much a matter of teaching clients about goals and actions — they readily use the language of goals and actions in presenting themselves and their issues to counsellors. However, there are numerous situations in which clients do not take the goal-informed or steering role required for achieving goals. It is here where counsellors can be active in supporting clients to close these gaps. Clients’ goals may not be available to them for reflection for several reasons, including the complex interrelation of the goal systems, and the various degrees of availability of goals to all participants in joint processes.

Misunderstanding 12 — The goals and actions of counselling itself are not necessarily reflective of the client’s career goals.

Most counsellors pay close attention to the joint activity they engage in with their clients. However, some may assume that the client’s career or life goals and related actions are not reflected in the joint action that occurs during counselling. Nonetheless, projects within counselling and outside of it are connected. In fact, the relationship project between the counsellor and client often reflects relationship projects that are going on outside of counselling which may involve career and other issues. The critical factor is that counselling is the project ground on which the counsellor can join the client. The counsellor needs to be very careful in preserving the possibility of counselling as a joint project. To accomplish this, the client’s narrative has to be given sufficient space (Young & Collin, 1992). The counsellor joins in developing such narratives but respects the leadership of the client. The counsellor has to work on the relationship project as well as on the project related to the presenting problem. It is general knowledge that in developing a good relationship with the client, the counsellor

has to facilitate the achievement of the client's important goals. These are not only the goals related to an occupational career but also to personal and identity career goals. It is the latter that clients often do not readily declare openly or are not fully accessible to clients, but which are emotionally very active.

The counselling process is often organized around goals that are jointly set by the client and the counsellor in such a way that their achievement can be evaluated. Counsellors are accustomed to helping outline a hierarchy of goals and sub goals, projects, actions and subactions in order to achieve agreed upon targets. Many of the goals and processes are related to the client's emotions or joint goals around which the client behaves in a functional way but which are not accessible for him or her. Because these goals and processes are not accessible to the client, when frustrated, they can lead to negative emotion. When satisfied, they can lead to the client's motivation to join in other actions or projects in order to realize still more of these satisfactory experiences.

The lack of access that a client may experience to his or her own goals and processes may be due to the client's partner, with whom the client is engaged in pursuing these goals, determining or holding these emotions or goals in a joint project. In turn, the client's participation in counselling on these issues may be directed by regulation processes that are influenced by the partner. They may lead to the inhibition of some of the client's important goals. The fact that a client feels threatened by the counsellor's attempt to facilitate his or her openness to less accessible emotions or joints projects could lead to client's regulation of their interaction in an aggressive way. Many of a client's interactive actions become readily understandable when we observe the client in an interaction or a joint action with relevant persons. An everyday counselling example is when the counsellor invites other family members (partners or parents) for a systemic session. In such a situation we can observe the key ways in which a client behaves in a specific context. We then immediately see the systemic reference and function of the client's critical behaviour. To round up this picture, it should not be forgotten that the career ideologies present in the society (Richardson, 2000) strongly influence the counselling processes. The counsellor employs these ideologies and the client refers to them, often as unspoken assumptions. That is to say, the concepts of career are first of all social constructions and not a right or wrong representations.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have pointed out a range of possible misunderstandings about contextual action theory that may lead practitioners and researchers to reject action theory unduly. Action theory integrates everyday working knowledge, that is, knowledge used in ongoing actions, into conceptualizing human processes and analyzing data. Because of the range of meanings attributed to everyday knowledge and concepts about goals, there is a need to clarify their meaning in action theory. In addressing some of the misrepresentations, we

clarified some conceptual, methodological and practical issues in counselling as outlined in the contextual theory of goal directed systems in action, project and career. Contextual action theory in counselling, as represented by the work of Young, Valach, and their co-workers provides a differentiated view of ongoing processes that the client is engaged in both within and outside of the counselling session itself. This view reaches far beyond seeing the client as engaging in pre-contemplation, then implementing a goal. and then developing a plan.

We believe that the action theoretical approach is very compatible with the whole spectrum of knowledge that covers micro and macro social psychological issues. It is a very useful resource for both counselling researchers and counselling practitioners.

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