Practical Applications

Utilizing chaos theory in career counseling does not require you to have a completely new toolbox. Many of the classic techniques can be utilized successfully, including those standard to the trait factor approach. The idea with any of the techniques is to help clients better understand their convergent and emergent qualities. Convergent qualities are those that is inherent in each person, and includes such things as skills, values, IQ, and knowledge—basically the things that can be assessed. Emergent qualities come from “the complex interaction of the many and varied factors that influence career behavior” (Pryor & Bright, 2006, p. 4). These qualities can be challenging because they cannot be predicted, they are unique to the individual, and sometimes determine a person’s career path. See the Counseling Quadrant (Pryor & Bright, 2006, p. 5) and additional references on the next page.

THE INCIDENTAL CAREER
Chaos Theory and Career Development
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Elements of Chaos Theory

Much of career development practice has been based on the quantitative trait factor approach, first implemented in the late 1800’s. Many things have changed in the last 100+ years. By itself, the trait factor approach doesn’t account for the complex, dynamic nature of people who have to deal with an ever-changing world. Chaos theory is a mathematical theory that has been applied successfully in many of the natural sciences. In career counseling, this theory is relevant as a basis for practice when helping clients deal with complexity, chance and change. Complexity of influences on career development make accurate predictability challenging. Expecting career counselors and clients to discover “THE answer” for a lifetime, may not be reasonable. The elements of chaos theory are described to help counselors make sense of this theory.

COMPLEXITY—Processes and influences shape each person’s life. Chaos theory emphasizes encouraging understanding these processes and patterns instead of “defining or predicting stable variables as outcomes” (Bright & Pryor, 2005, p. 296).

EMERGENCE—Though chaos theory focuses on the complexity of human experience, in complexity patterns begin to emerge. Emergence works to make sense out of past experiences.

NONLINEARITY—Small changes or influences can make a dramatic, if not disproportionate impact. When reviewing past career experiences, it is important to look at everything, even what seems to be trivial, to help shed light on the result.

UNPREDICTABILITY—Chance events will influence a client’s career. Encouraging exploration of these events will help clients understand the uncertain nature of careers. Counselors can help clients recognize and take advantage of future chance events.

PHASE SHIFTS—Clients “can undergo radical changes in career direction” (Bright & Pryor, 2005, p. 296). These changes can be due to external factors or internal factors.

ATTRACTORS—Attractors influence behavior as a pull or as a constraint. According to Bright & Pryor (2005) there are 4 types:

- Point: “behavior when the object is attracted to one specific thing” (p. 300)
- Pendulum: “constrains behavior to a regular, predictable pattern” (p. 300)
- Torus: “more complex but is ultimately constrained and repeating” (p. 301)
- Strange: “never repeating but self-similar” (p. 301)

The Four C’s of the Chaos Theory of Careers

COMPLEXITY—Change—CONSTRUCTIVENESS—Chance
Counseling Approaches

WORKING IDENTITY APPROACH (Ibarra)
- Act, then reflect (don’t wait for a catalyst, seize windows of opportunity
- Flirt with yourself
- Find people who are what you want to be
- Consider opportunities that may be horizontal and allow you to develop skills that will further advance you toward your end goal
- Make big change in small steps
- Experiment with new roles
- Live the contradictions

INFORMED OPPORTUNISM (Judith Waterman)
- Learn market trends
- Be aware of your own strengths, skills & priorities
- Scan constantly for opportunities
- Jump at opportunities that fit you well

PLANNED HAPPENSTANCE (John Krumboltz)
- Make the most out of unplanned events
- Always keep your options open
- Try it—take a risk—even without knowing the outcomes
- Go ahead and make mistakes

Interventions and Exercises

Counselors can utilize a variety of interventions and exercises that are reflective of chaos theory. Some of these interventions include:

- Metaphor
- Myth
- Archetypes
- Poetry
- Heroes
- Story-telling/narrative counseling
- Card sorts
- Genograms
- Timelines
- Life space/mind mapping
- Pattern identification
- Autobiographies
- Structured interviews

Additional exercises have been detailed by Pryor & Bright (2006) for to use in either individual or group sessions. These exercises help counselors to understand and utilize the theory relative to the client.

THE SIGNATURE EXERCISE
In summary, the client(s) writes his/her name multiple times within a given time period. The goals of the exercise are to (a) show that reality is based on self-organization and chance, (b) life includes order and randomness, (c) patterns and variations can appear at the same time (d) demonstrate the limits of control even over common tasks, (e) show differences between emergent and convergent thinking patterns.

THE SOMETIMES MAGIC EXERCISE
In summary, Sometimes Magic cards are handed to client(s) and the client(s) is instructed to think of examples of circumstances where they may have had special experiences. Counselors follow up with questions about the experiences to achieve the following goals: (a) recognition of the unexpected in the experiences; (b) help explore the newly discovered understanding of the client(s) history (c) help clients discover ways to be more creative.

THE PARABLE OF THE PING-PONG BALL
In summary, the parable is an every day example that either given to the client(s) to read, is read out loud, or is drawn by the counselor. The goals of the parable are: (a) increased complexity leads to decreased ability to predict outcomes; (b) even when accurate prediction is limited, it doesn’t mean that the experience can’t be explained or understood; (c) demonstrate that change is nonlinear; (d) to introduce the concept of phase shift; (e) show limitations of knowledge and control and the need to make decisions with limited knowledge of influences and outcomes; (f) recognize that one will always have to make decisions and face challenges.

The above exercises can be found, in detail, in the 2006 Pryor & Bright article in the Journal of Employment Counseling.
Bibliography and Additional Resources


