Outlining and discussing various psychological perspectives on career meta-capacities

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Psycho-social career meta-capacities: Dynamics of contemporary career development

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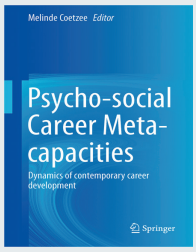

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Review Title:
Outlining and discussing various psychological perspectives on career meta-capacities

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, the career landscape has changed dramatically. This is due to major economic, social, technological and organisational changes (Colakoglu, 2011). Characterised by trends such as globalisation, demographic change and international migration, the workforce has become increasingly diverse. According to Arnold and Randall (2010), this development has resulted in a broader variety of knowledge, skills, experiences and attitudes amongst individuals. Shifting trends in the contemporary world of work have led to renewed interest in the psychological factors that influence people's commitment to organisations (Coetzee & Gunz, 2012). Employees are becoming more dependent on their psychological and social capacities and less dependent on career arrangements (Tladinyane, Coetzee & Masenge, 2013). According to Converse, Pathak, DePaul-Haddock, Gotlib and Merbedone (2012), individuals have to rely heavily on their personal career-related capabilities and dispositions to succeed effectively in more turbulent work settings.

From a review scanning four decades of research in Organisational Career Psychology in South Africa, Schreuder and Coetzee (2012) emphasised that career development, professional issues and career interventions are under-researched in such a multi-cultural context. One might suggest that this gave rise to the book *Psycho-social career meta-capacities*, edited by Melinde Coetzee. According to Coetzee, this book intends to offer the practicing professional new perspectives on career constructs and measures to consider in counselling and guidance regarding the contemporary career, and it ultimately intends to guide future research in this subject matter.

This book, aptly titled *Psycho-social career meta-capacities: Dynamics of contemporary career development*, aims to address a gap in current research literature. This is done by encompassing various psychological perspectives on the psycho-social capacities that people need in order to solve the challenging complexities posed by careers in the contemporary workplace and labour market. The purpose of this review is to introduce the publication to the readers of the *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* (SAJIP) and simultaneously provide a brief general overview of the book and the value added to the field of Industrial and Organisational Psychology.

General overview

The book consists of 17 chapters, which were written by various subject specialists in their field of research. The contributors (i.e. the authors of the various chapters) are not only national researchers but also include various well-known international researchers. This fact makes the contribution of the work not only relevant to the South-African context but also to the international body of literature. Although 17 chapters might be considered as an extensive volume, it is well structured into four easier 'digestible' sections, each focusing on a specific broader theme. The four sections can be outlined as follows:

- Part 1: Psycho-social dynamics of the contemporary career-development context
- Part 2: Psycho-social career meta-capacities in organisational career development
- Part 3: Career well-being and psycho-social career meta-capacities
- Part 4: Psycho-social career meta-capacities in educational career development.

In the preface to the book, the editor sets out the structure expertly and briefly outlines the main ideas of the themes relating to the various sections. Preceding the various chapters in each section, the editor also provides a brief summary or synopsis of the findings in the chapters to follow. This enables readers to understand and gain an overall overview of the chapters integrated into broader themes.

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In Part 1, the scene is set to understand the challenges and dynamics of contemporary career development, in which career meta-capacities are modelled as multi-dimensional. Potgieter (p. 35) refers to career meta-competencies as a set of psychological career resources that are critical in career development (Potgieter, p. 35). The chapters in Part 1 emphasise that the development of individual, psycho-social, career meta-capacities should be seen as a focal point of inquiry in contemporary career development. Broader socio-economic and political factors (i.e. creating new generations of unemployed individuals) should also not be neglected. General topics covered during these first six chapters include the following:

- positioning employability in the unemployment context
- employment and reorganizational contexts
- the protean career attitude as a career meta-capacity in the unemployment context
- personality attributes influencing one's capacity to demonstrate psycho-social employability attributes
- using career meta-capacities to comply with suitable work
- the systematic location in which career identity is constructed
- exploring psycho-social meta-capacities from a holistic perspective.

Each chapter concludes by giving the practical implication of the aforementioned topics for career counselling and guidance. The first section concludes with chapter 6, which proposes a psychological framework for career resources (career meta-capacities) that is supported by quantitative research. This chapter reports the findings on the development and validation of a quantitative measure of psychological career resources that can be applied in the contemporary context of career counselling.

Part 2 in the book explores the role of psycho-social career meta-capacities in the organisational context by placing special emphasis on the relevance of person-environment fit in contemporary career development. According to Coetzee (p. 119), optimal person-environment (i.e. job, occupation, organisation) fit or congruence may be increasingly difficult to achieve in the workplace of the 21st century. It is important to recognise how employees' psycho-social career meta-capacities (e.g. their career anchors and interests), the characteristics of their job as well as occupations and the organisational culture influence their perceptions and experiences of fit. This section of the book contributes to a better understanding of the psycho-social meta-capacities influencing employees' job and career satisfaction as well as their affective commitment and engagement. General topics covered in these four chapters are the following:

- the relation of interest-occupation congruence with different indicators of career satisfaction and productivity
- most recent literature on Schein's career-anchor theory and its relevance to contemporary career development
- relating the notion of psychological ownership to employees' career anchors
- exploring psycho-social career meta-competencies with retention-related dispositions such as job embeddedness and organisational commitment.

In these chapters, empirical evidence shows that person-environment incongruence relates, amongst other things, to outcomes such as job and career dissatisfaction as well as lower engagement and commitment.

The main focus of Part 3 is on career well-being. This section consists of two chapters that point out the increasing importance for career practitioners to assess their clients' general career well-being. It is crucial to establish beforehand whether individuals have the psycho-social career meta-capacities to cope successfully within a more complex career terrain. This section addresses the notions of flourishing and the sense of coherence as meta-capacities that may promote career and subjective well-being. To optimise person-environment integration, career assessment should focus on profiling core career meta-capacities that are needed for flourishing. Moreover, by strengthening employees' psycho-social career meta-capacities, they may experience a stronger sense of coherence. Part 3 provides a perspective which is strongly in line with the strength-based focus of the positive-psychology movement. Again, the practical implication of this research for career counselling is emphasised where career practitioners should strive to help clients to choose occupations and work roles that fit their interests, values and abilities.

Part 4, the final section of the book, emphasises the role of services in career education and educational institutions in preparing children, adolescents and students for the complex challenges that the world of work presents. Important psycho-social resources covered during these last five chapters include the following: career construction, career adaptability, flourishing, early career expectations and entitlements in the psychological contract, entrepreneurship and life-long learning. In accordance with the previous chapters on meta-career capacities, the emphasis is on generic, transferable graduate attributes and skills as critical resources for employability. This leads to the following conclusion: Both career practitioners and educators should work together in assisting students across lifespan phases to recognise these resources and capacities and apply them to develop their mind-sets, skills and attributes. This will enable them to become more employable and to flourish in their careers.

Contribution and value added to the field of Industrial and Organisational/Work Psychology

According to Schreuder and Coetzee (2012), the increasingly complex context in which people are pursuing their careers calls for the continuous generation and development of knowledge to benefit the discipline and the practice of

careers. The insights derived from the findings in this publication definitely contribute specifically to the field of Industrial and Organisational/Work Psychology. Thus it can be employed by academia and researchers in initiatives of career research across the spectrum. Some of the chapters report on empirical work on career research specifically done in South Africa. These topics include the psychometric properties of the Psychological Career Resources Inventory (PCRI), flourishing in work and careers and the psychological contract of first-year management students. Thus it is clear that the findings add to the body of knowledge on the evolution of the field and to professional practice within the South-African context.

It is also worth mentioning that the study adds specific value to the occupation of industrial psychologist or career practitioner. The first chapter on employability and self-regulation in contemporary careers holds real value for enhancing the set of skills of practicing industrial psychologists or career practitioners in South Africa. Industrial psychologists need to understand employability and how it is positioned in the various contexts that they encounter in South Africa (i.e. unemployment, employment and reorganizational contexts). It is a matter of increasing importance for industrial psychologists to understand that career development stretches beyond the structured boundaries of career development done by organisations and companies. Thus the responsibility for career management has shift to each individual involved.

Psychologists or career practitioners working within organisations also have the responsibility to convey this message to the employees or employers and other individuals in that context. This publication can be particularly helpful in such an endeavour. The findings indicate the individual psycho-social meta-capacities that individuals need to obtain to be successful in their careers and in the current world of work. This will help individuals to build and sustain their employability. Specifically, the measurement tool which is proposed in chapter 6 (the PCRI) can be extremely helpful for career practitioners in assessing the strengths and underdeveloped facets of clients' or employees' psycho-social career meta-capacities and provide focused counselling and remediation.

Overall impression and conclusion

Overall, the impression of this book is that it is a quite well-structured book, covering core aspects of contemporary careers and career development. As Coetzee indicated in the preface, psycho-social career meta-attributes, resources and capacities have become more salient in today's career and the turbulent environment. Together, the various contributors seem to cover these psycho-social career meta-capacities very well. This book's credibility lies in the quality of the research and the theory, which is postulated and discussed in the chapters. In the majority of the chapters, authors use empirical data and case studies to explain their viewpoints. It is notable that these chapters stem from rigorous empirical research in the field of career development. Nevertheless, the author strives to focus not solely on the contribution to research in these fields. Contributors also attempt to apply their work to the career-counselling context. In the last section of each chapter, practical implications are provided for career counselling and guidance. The applications are practical and hands-on to assist individuals or career practitioners within the field of careers.

The book provides rich content, covering the various psychological perspectives on the psycho-social capacities and resources that individuals require and utilise within the context of career development. However, the engagement of the topics demands advanced reading and comprehension of the subject matter. Already the title of the book confronts readers with concepts such as *psycho-social* and *meta-capacities*, which are not commonly known amongst employees or career practitioners. Only in chapter 3 does Potgieter (p. 35) introduce the concept of career meta-competencies more clearly by defining it '… as a set of psychological resources which are critical in career development'.

The content becomes problematic when considering the intended audience for the book (i.e. specialists, professionals and post-graduate students). It becomes clear that the contents of the book imply a more complex and scientific academic perspective on career development. Thus, such a publication could be utilised rather as a literature source for post-graduate studies, possibly more at a doctorate level. In my opinion, this product is well positioned as an academic publication and contributes significantly towards theory and towards building the body of knowledge within the academic sphere of research.

In conclusion, this is a well-structured book, covering a variety of complex psychological perspectives on meta-capacities in career development. This publication should be a welcome companion for seasoned academics who focus on career-related research, not only in South Africa but internationally as well.

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