Resilience and career adaptability: Qualitative studies of adult career counseling

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Abstract

Global economic recession is exerting extreme pressures not only on individuals attempting to move into and through labor markets, but also on those providing support for such transitions. Resilience and career adaptability are increasingly relevant, yet despite being present in the literature for some time, these concepts have been under-represented in the vocational psychology literature. This article represents a contribution to redressing this balance by focusing on their potential to make positive contributions both to clients of career counseling and to practitioners delivering these services. Drawing on data from four qualitative studies conducted in England, Norway and the Republic of Ireland from 2003 to 2012, these concepts are examined, together with their complementarity for career counseling practice. The article also discusses the role, status and conduct of qualitative research as well as the importance of the researcher/participant relationship in qualitative research investigations.

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1. Introduction

The development of a career-resilient work-force dedicated to the idea of continuous learning and reinvention is now being promulgated (Council of the European Union, 2008; Field, 2010; Organisation of Economic Co-Operation & Development, 2004). Individuals' career development is no longer viewed as linear and hierarchical, but multifaceted, unstable, cyclical, and transitional over the life course (Bimrose, Barnes, & Hughes, 2008; Hearne, 2010). The need for the ability to self-negotiate such terrain has become more pronounced with global economic recession and the cost of living in a 'risk society' (Beck, 1999). Consequent demands on both clients and career counselors have increased in recent times, since any type of positive or negative life event, such as, promotion or redundancy, can disrupt an individual's accustomed lifestyle in ways that may require certain coping strategies. One of the key skills required by career professionals is the ability to empower individuals to manage their own career paths and deal with multiple transitions (Council of the European Union, 2008). This highlights the need for career counseling to help individuals develop strategies, like resilience and career adaptability, so that they might navigate better volatile labor markets (Bimrose, Barnes, & Hughes, 2008; Hearne, 2010; Savickas et al., 2009; Sultana, 2011). Similarly, the potential of career adaptability has been argued for increasing the efficacy and impact of career counseling, enabling individuals to become self-sufficient by supporting themselves and enhancing high performance working (Bimrose, Brown, Barnes, & Hughes, 2011). As career counseling can be pivotal at turning points in individuals' lives, it needs to support and promote both resiliency and career adaptability. However, these are not issues confined to clients. Career counselors in the current economic climate are increasingly expected to operate within target-driven, under-resourced organizations while supporting disenfranchised clients with complex needs (Bimrose, 2010; Blustein, 2006; Douglas, 2011; Launikari, Lettmayr, & van Loo, 2011). Safeguarding against professional burnout often requires emotional regulation in the form of adaptive coping strategies to enhance productive functioning over a long term basis (Leahy, Tirch, & Napolitano, 2011; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011).
Although the emphasis to date in policy is overwhelmingly on clients' capacity for resilience, attention equally needs to be given to the resiliency of those working in careers support work.

The relevance of the dual phenomena of resilience and career adaptability in career counseling for both counselors and their clients is discussed in this article. Empirical findings that provide the basis of the discussion are drawn from four qualitative research studies conducted between 2003 and 2012 in England, Norway and the Republic of Ireland, involving a total of 131 participants, 119 of whom were clients of career counseling, together with 12 career professionals. The career stories from all of these adult participants elucidate both the complexities of career management for clients of career services in the three countries, as well as the increasing trend of career professionals operating under pressure.

2. Defining the concepts

Over the past three decades, a range of related concepts and operational definitions have emerged that relate to the notion that adults engage in both career transitions and career change by developing coping responses and behaviors (Dix & Savickas, 1995). Resilience and career adaptability are two such responses.

Perspectives on resilience have emerged from a range of disciplines in recent years. However, the concepts of ‘resilience’ and, more specifically, ‘career resilience’ from both a psychological and environmental perspective are pertinent to the four studies discussed here. Resilience denotes “the motivational force within everyone that drives them to pursue wisdom, self-actualization, and altruism and to be in harmony with a spiritual source of strength” (Richardson, 2002, p. 309). The concept did not emerge from an academic grounding in theory. Rather, it was a result of three waves of inquiry related to understanding resilient qualities, the resiliency process and innate resilience (Richardson, 2002). First, resilient qualities are protective factors or developmental assets that help individuals survive adversity and involve a range of variables identified in the field including self-esteem, self-efficacy, subjective well-being, self-determination, locus of control and support systems. Second, the resiliency process entails coping with adversity, change, or opportunity through the law of disruption and reintegration (Flach, 1997). Third, innate resilience is described as a postmodern multidisciplinary identification of motivational forces within individuals that drive them towards self-actualization and to reintegrate fractured identities (Richardson, 2002).

Through certain processes such as education and therapy clients “recognize that they have choices to grow, recover, or lose in the face of disruptions”, (Richardson, 2002, p. 312). The role of the helper is to listen, empathize and support an individual who may be dealing with primary emotions such as loss, guilt, fear, perplexity, confusion, self-doubt or bewilderment during disruptive times. In essence, “embracing resilience and resiliency theory prompts helping professionals to search for individual strengths in clients and then to nurture them”. (Richardson, 2002, p. 317). More specifically, career resilience is defined as “the ability to adapt to change, even when the circumstances are discouraging or disruptive”, (London, 1997, p. 34), implying the development of certain coping strategies, including emotional capacities, to overcome structural and/or dispositional barriers (Bimrose et al., 2008; Cardoso & Moreira, 2009; Hearne, 2010).

Career adaptability is regarded increasingly as a multi-dimensional construct that relates to the variable capacity of individuals to negotiate transitions successfully (Savickas, 2008). A widely accepted definition builds on the original work of Super and Knasel (1981): “the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions” (Savickas, 1997, p. 254). Some (Goodman, 1994; Kohn, O'Brien Wood, Pickering, & Decicco, 2003) have argued that career resilience is close to the definition of career adaptability proposed by Super and Knasel (1981). However, career resilience appears to relate more to the ability to survive change once it happens, whereas career adaptability has a stronger proactive dimension.

An international multi-country investigation of career adaptability has adopted a psycho-social perspective, emphasizing the importance of context by considering the impact of change on social integration. Referred to as adapt-ability resources, these are regarded as human capital, less fixed than traits, with four dimensions consistently identified: concern, control, curiosity and autonomy (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). This study closely aligns to the earlier life designing approach to careers, where helping individuals become more resourceful and autonomous is paramount. Here, the four core career adaptability competencies were discussed, with commitment identified as a fifth. Specifically: control emphasizing the need for individuals to exert a degree of influence on their situations; curiosity emphasizing the value in broadening horizons by exploring social opportunities and possibilities; confidence relating to believing in yourself and your ability to achieve what is necessary to realize your career goal; and concern referring to stimulating or developing a positive and optimistic attitude to the future. The fifth competency, commitment, was defined as stressing how individuals should experiment with new and different activities and projects, rather than being focused narrowly on getting into a particular job, so that new possibilities can be generated (Savickas et al., 2009). Certain individual characteristics emerge as central to the development of career adaptability, including personality dimensions that influence how well individuals adjust to working in different work contexts (for example, the degree of control and self-regulation), how flexible they are when faced with change, how proactive they are in looking for new challenges and how willing they are to make plans with implications for their future career. Behaviors conditioned by adaptability include self and environmental exploration and career decisiveness (Bimrose et al., 2011).

Professionals who choose to engage in careers work are “likely to care deeply about vulnerable clients and are anxious to make a difference”, (Reid, 2010, p. 195). This involves high touch work which is defined as “highly skilled professional attachment, involvement, and separation over and over again with one person after another” (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011, p. 106). The recent economic situation has resulted in more adults who are feeling distressed and who are under pressure to make alternative career decisions seeking career intervention support. Yet, career counseling work takes place in a broader social context. In spite
of national economic constraints and tightened organizational structures in the careers sector in England and the Republic of Ireland, there is still an expectation that career professionals will continue to respond to the increasing demands of disenfranchised adults, as well as educators, employers, funders and policymakers operating in a global economic downturn. Furthermore, the imposition of a cost-benefit approach to provision is likely to impact negatively on the day-to-day work of career professionals who need to achieve highly specific targets and prove the economic worth of their work to different stakeholders (Douglas, 2011). As a result of such pressures on their time and energy, career professionals need to have greater levels of resilience, which has been somewhat overlooked due to the focus on supporting clients’ resilience during times of crisis and change (Hearne, 2012).

Four empirical studies that investigated the dual concepts of resilience and career adaptability for clients and for career professionals are now discussed.

3. Methodology

All four studies used qualitative methodologies to investigate different aspects of career counseling interventions. A review of published qualitative studies calls for significant improvement in the conduct of qualitative research, because standards of academic rigor were found either not to have been adhered to, or not properly reported (Stead et al., 2011). This review also draws attention to the relatively small contribution to the literature by studies informed by qualitative methodologies, advocating urgent discussion by the career development community around why this situation exists. If the continued avoidance, or reluctance to use qualitative methodologies relates to a fundamental belief that these are unsuitable for addressing core career-related questions, then this needs to be addressed (Stead et al., 2011). The four studies referred to here are relevant to this debate, since it can be argued that they address the methodological dimensions criticized as typically neglected or under-reported. Each specifies the: sampling methodology; sample size (in terms of breakdown of age range, ethnicity, gender and disability; location and settings); research method; type of data collected; and computer program used (where relevant). They also address the need for reflexivity in qualitative research and acknowledge the issues of bias; address the need for trustworthiness, for example: through the use of external auditors; inter-rater reliability; explication of the coding method used; data triangulation; and adherence to ethical procedures (Stead et al., 2011).

However, all four received funding support from different agencies that required the publication of research reports to inform policy as a condition of funding, so were consequently not submitted to the academic journals that were the focus of the review by Stead et al. (2011). One factor in the debate about the visibility of qualitative career research would appear, therefore, to relate to the complex inter-relationship between funded research and policy, and between funded research and publication requirements. It may be that high quality research into career counseling has been conducted using qualitative methodologies that has not been published in academic journals, but is nevertheless freely and readily available as gray literature.

Full details of each of the four research studies are provided elsewhere, so have not been repeated here. Two were longitudinal case studies, one extending across five years, from 2003 to 2008, and undertaken in England (Bimrose, Barnes, Hughes, & Orton, 2004), the other extending across four years from 2005 to 2009 in the Republic of Ireland (Hearne, 2010). This type of research method requires repeated measurements from the same set of participants allowing for assessment of intra-individual change over a particular time span (Taris, 2000) and these types of person-centered case studies can provide a holistic view of individual development functioning in changing economic and socio-historical contexts (Schoon, 2007; Swanson & Fouad, 2010). Both studies investigated the effectiveness of outcomes of career counseling for clients and involved tracking clients’ career development during different ‘time waves’ in England and the Republic of Ireland, post career counseling intervention. Both assessed patterns of adjustment and change in clients, and explored the causal links in the real-life intervention of career counseling (DePoy & Gilson, 2008). The first, a five year case study, involved in-depth interviews with 50 clients carried out immediately after a career counseling intervention. Follow up interviews were conducted each year over the next four years, to capture the career stories of clients and evaluate the impact of the career counseling intervention (Bimrose & Barnes, 2007; Bimrose, Barnes, & Hughes, 2005, 2006; Bimrose et al., 2004). The second, a four year case study, involved in-depth interviews with 5 clients (Hearne, 2010) who were purposefully sampled from an earlier quantitative study in a specific adult career service (Hearne, 2005). Four clients had received one-to-one guidance in 2001, and one in 2003. They were interviewed face-to-face in 2006 and 4 were followed-up by telephone in 2009, thereby giving a longitudinal span of between six and eight years. The interview data elicited interpretive understandings of their subjective experiences of career progression over time.

The other two qualitative studies referred used different methodologies. The third adopted a narrative approach to undertake a retrospective evaluation of a career adaptability framework retrospectively (Bimrose et al., 2011). It built upon a major ten country investigation into changing patterns of career development across Europe (Brown et al., 2010) and illustrated ways that people were more successful than others in negotiating a series of work-related transitions. Data from 32 in-depth interviews with adults in the Norwegian labor market were analyzed and compared with data from 32 in-depth interviews with adults in transition in the UK labor market. These two particular countries were selected for the study because they represented contrasting labor markets at the time, with Norway a relatively buoyant economy and England experiencing economic recession.

The fourth and most recent study (Hearne, 2012), which was conducted over a three-month period in early 2012, examined professional resilience for 12 career counselors from a range of adult guidance services in the Republic of Ireland and England. A constructivist, grounded theory approach elucidated the meaning of resilience through in-depth interviews with the practitioners (Charmaz, 2006). The ten Irish practitioners work in the Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI), the Local Employment Service (LES) and an adult education center. The two English practitioners work in a University Careers Service and a Public Employment Service.
4. Results

Two of the four empirical studies outlined above collected in-depth, longitudinal data from mid-career adults in England or Ireland. The third collected retrospective data on career trajectories from sixty-four mid-career adults in Norway and the UK. The fourth focused on career professionals and the personal resources, including resilience, needed to provide services to clients in challenging economic times. Pseudonyms were used throughout to protect identity. Data from all four studies exemplify the concepts of both resilience and career adaptability, explicating their inter-relationship. For example, one career narrative, taken from the five-year longitudinal study in England, relates to Mary who had been made redundant from a teaching position after nine years. She immediately undertook training courses to enable her to retain a foothold in education. Aged 49 at the time of her first research interview, she was married with a family. To supplement the family income, she worked two part-time jobs, and then applied for a series of other part-time jobs, capitalizing on opportunities that emerged from local networks. The variety suited her and she recognized that she had ‘always fallen into things by accident’ by using personal contacts and ‘being in the right place at the right time’. However, after three years of working in this way, she had begun to feel dissatisfied and restless: ‘I’m good at being a jack-of-all-trades and master of none!’ When looking back over the previous five years, she regarded this period as a: ‘mega mid-life crisis’ and felt she has now: ‘crawled back through.’ Her plans to apply for other jobs had not been implemented. Mary still worked in a café and a local theater, because she liked to be involved in different things: ‘I don’t like to do just one thing. I like to have lots of different ideas going on...I like to pick up completely new things and start again...’

After five years of tracking the career progress of this individual, Mary was still working across a number of part-time jobs and was still undecided about her future career direction: ‘Here I am at (early fifties) and I still don’t know what I want to do!’ While showing considerable resilience, by coping with redundancy, finding and maintaining a variety of part-time jobs that fit with the constraints of her caring role as mother to three children, this participant had not demonstrated career adaptability. In particular, Mary had not developed the competency of ‘control’, which would have enabled her to exert influence on her situation, rather than falling into whatever job presented itself. Nor had she demonstrated ‘curiosity’, by broadening her horizons through the exploration of other possibilities. She had done what she had needed to do in order to get by and this was taking its toll in terms of her dissatisfaction with her current position and feelings of disorientation about the future. Over the five years her career development was tracked, she had not demonstrated the confidence to undertake retraining to achieve a career goal (courses she had enrolled on, she had not completed) and since there was no evidence of a positive and optimistic attitude to her future, she did not appear to have developed concern about her situation. She had, however, demonstrated commitment, insofar as she had involved herself in a range of different activities and jobs, which were beginning to generate motivation to adopt a more proactive stance.

From the Irish longitudinal case study, the career development experiences of five clients pursuing various education programs during an eight-year period demonstrates varying levels of resilience and career adaptability over time. In particular, the process of being resilient emerged as a significant factor when faced with a range of barriers such as age, low confidence, stressful situations, family demands, organizational intransigence and financial considerations. Resilience manifested itself in the form of personal attributes such as being tenacious, determined, single-minded, flexible and adaptable. For one client, the issues of resilience were particularly pronounced, as well as career adaptability. Derek (54), who had left school at 16, had always dreamed of returning to education at some point, but a combination of problems, namely alcohol addiction and family commitments, had prevented him from doing so for nearly 40 years. In 2001, after years of low-paid, un-stimulating jobs he sought career guidance because he

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If there is something you really want to do – if it’s a passion – you don’t give up!’ Now she wants to set up her own business. Sonia not only demonstrated resilience in coping with barriers to her career progression, but her ability to establish and then develop the career adaptive competencies needed to navigate these barriers. Sonia’s narrative demonstrates all five career adaptive competencies. Concern, through her irrepressibly optimistic attitude about the future; confidence, in her unshakeable belief in her
ability to succeed; curiosity, in broadening her horizons by constantly seeking out various opportunities and exploring possibilities; commitment, investing considerable personal resources in new projects; and control, by acting to change her situation when she felt this was necessary. From the same study, Ingrid, from Norway, quit her first job (in postal services) to study for a degree in international marketing. She then had a series of jobs in sales and marketing, moving expressly 'for greater challenge — I was so young and fearless at the time!' Then she became a Human Relations Manager in the oil industry, while also studying part-time for a Masters qualification. She stayed in this job for nine years, partly because of the flexibility she needed to combine the care of her two children (then aged 11 and 13) with employment. Her proactive approach to work is based on doing a job well, mastery of a knowledge base and strong organizational and relational skills. With regard to her own future, Ingrid emphasized that looking for her next job: 'I will use my networks to ensure that I take the right decision' and that you need 'to find out what you really want'. The five career adaptive competencies (Savickas et al., 2009) provides a framework for evaluating the extent to which these two women, making transitions in different labor markets, had become increasingly career adaptive over their years in the labor market. Both women also demonstrated resilience when encountering difficulties and challenges in their careers.

Finally, the findings from the most recent study of career counselors in Ireland demonstrate the necessity for career professionals to be resilient alongside their clients and developing their own career adaptive competencies when dealing with the fallout from the economic recession. In particular, the 12 counselor narratives highlight the substantive challenges of engaging in high-touch work with clients and the necessity of resilience in their work role. Four key challenges were identified: the volume and diversity of clients seeking help; the complexity of client issues, including mental health problems associated with unemployment such as depression, anxiety and a sense of hopelessness; the difficulties of managing the variant expectations of stakeholders (i.e. clients, service managers, funders); and the difficulty of measuring outcomes of interventions during a time of increased service activity and constrained human resources. Varied levels of resilience emerged, which relate to the personal outlook of the career counselors, responses to ever-expanding workloads, esteem held by management, their longevity within the service and their capacity for emotional regulation. Resilience in high-touch work relates to qualities, dispositions and behaviors of the professionals, including the ability to bounce back, cope, be balanced and self-managed in the face of poor organizational support. While some career counselors described themselves as being confident, positive, motivated and committed to the work, a small number found it difficult to be buoyant because of their increasing workloads. This aligns closely with the career adaptability competence of 'confidence', which requires the maintenance of strong self-belief and the ability to deliver what is necessary to achieve career goals. In this particular organizational context, it would seem that some career counselors also needed to develop career adaptive competencies to enable them to deal with challenges of unprecedented workloads and unpredictability, as well as having the resilience to contend with the unknown of what 'comes through the door' (career counselor).

Although none of the 12 career counselors had experienced complete burnout that involved considerable time off work, some reported symptoms of mild depression, anxiety and weariness. The most noteworthy was cumulative exhaustion (physical, mental, emotional) experienced by all of them at some point. Essential coping strategies did emerge from the data, such as distancing from clients, and the creation of strict professional boundaries with all stakeholders (that is, colleagues and managers), in maintaining an external life and strong professional support in the form of supervision, peer mentoring and continuing professional development. Both these strategies align with the career adaptive competency of 'control', which emphasizes the need for individuals to exert influence over their situations. Only 3 of the 12 career counselors, however, felt they would be able to continue in the work over a long period of time, with others either re-considering or concerned about their future. Three career counselors felt conflicted; even though they enjoyed their work concerns about stamina, lifestyle and burnout were prominent. One career counselor, who had worked for the career organization for five years and had recently been obliged to fulfill three roles as co-ordinator, counselor and information officer in a wide catchment area due to a moratorium on recruitment, stated: 'I feel I get a lot more tired and I do worry about the long term...of chasing my tail to the extent that I am doing it long term'. This mirrors worrying developments in recent times whereby the government funding body has imposed new target groups upon the adult career services without providing adequate resources to support the work.

5. Discussion

The significance of the contribution of quantitative research methods to career psychology is readily acknowledged (Savickas, 2001), but an over-dependence on this approach and failure to integrate qualitative methods in mainstream enquiry, has created a deficit of knowledge and understanding for the field (Blustein, 2006) that becomes more detrimental as time passes. This seems to be a particular issue for developing theory that underpins more effective practice for clients who experience systemic and persistent disadvantage in the labor market (for example, Bimrose, 2008). Using qualitative methodologies that arguably met the aforementioned quality criteria identified by Stead et al. (2011) as strong indicators of robust qualitative research, findings from the four qualitative studies referred to here indicate the utility of the dual concepts of resilience and career adaptability in careers work. Data from these studies provide thick descriptions of career trajectories from adults that illustrate patterns of behavior within a timeframe that goes beyond the present. Resilience emerges as an important factor in the ability of individuals to overcome a range of personal and structural barriers. Yet this is largely ignored in the policy discourse that tends to focus overwhelmingly on outcomes (Hearne, 2010), neglecting the crucial issue of well-being and mental health. Career adaptability, similarly, has not yet entered the policy discourse, being marginalized by concepts like employability, that emphasize the centrality of organizations in career development, rather than individuals (Duarte, 2004).

In the five-year longitudinal study of 50 clients from England and in the five Irish longitudinal case studies, participants demonstrated varying levels of resilience and adaptability in managing adversity at various points in their career development.
For some, poor health, low self-efficacy expectations, lack of employment opportunities in their local labor markets, changes of personal priorities, and the lack of institutional support contributed to them 'giving-up' on their education and career aspirations. In contrast, for others, these types of barriers were not an issue, suggesting that a strong commitment to an ultimate career goal can be fruitful if an individual is resilient and develops career adaptability over time. From the comparative study of adults in Norway and the UK, evidence of career adaptability associated with a range of benefits. For example, it supports vocational and competence development, as well as the motivation for individuals to develop intellectually and personally (Creed, Fallon, & Hood, 2009). Adopting a competency approach to developing career adaptive behavior could provide a useful framework to promote the need for mid-career adults to embrace certain behaviors to help them realize their career aspirations. This approach may also offer a potentially constructive framework for raising awareness of self-defeating behavior, promote learning and increase autonomy (Bimrose et al., 2011). A key challenge is, therefore, how best to inform and support individuals to invest time and effort in honing their career adaptability skills. It should, however, be noted that the recent shift in policy discourse towards the concept of personal responsibility for one's career development espoused through such terms as 'career resilience' and 'career adaptability' is viewed by some as problematic, since policymakers need to ensure that 'individuals are not expected to assume greater individual responsibility without being offered appropriate support' (Sultana, 2011, p. 183).

A key issue that emerged from the four qualitative studies was the complex role of the researcher–practitioner in qualitative career research. The potential of interpretive research to risk “impingement between the domains of research and intervention with significant ethical implications” has been documented (Richardson 2005, p. 4). Career professionals are particularly skilled in relational work and able to carry out qualitative research with their clients and/or peers. However, in the search for ‘truth’ and the protection of the rights and values of research participants, career professionals need to respect boundaries and respond appropriately to the ethical issues involved (Richardson, 2005). A distinctive ethical dilemma can arise in the situation of dual relationships where there is an imbalance of power between the counselor–researcher and the practitioner–client (Haverkamp, 2005). Interviewing or observing fellow career professionals requires equal consideration. An ethic of care and reflexivity can counter difficulties and result in a more equitable process that is mutually beneficial to both parties involved in the process (Richardson, 2005). Practitioner–researchers need to attend specifically to issues of competence, multiple relationships, confidentiality and informed consent. In all four studies, cognizance was given to managing these boundaries, with both the clients and career professionals, through ethical regulation at two levels: i) legislative, which required institutional approval by ethics committees and professional associations; and ii) personal, through the exercise of continuous ethical and professional reflexivity.

The dual concepts of career resilience and adaptability are barely evident in the policy and practice discourses of career counseling that have, to date, tended to marginalize issues of well-being and work in the literature. Herein, the concepts have been explored, through the medium of four qualitative research studies and their potential utility has been argued. Through scrutiny of the career stories of mid-career adults and career professionals, a strong indication emerges that these concepts complement each other. Together, they offer an explanatory framework for helping adults seeking career counseling support, to understand their situation and consider how they might move forward constructively in progressing their careers.

References
