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Original article

## Action and language: Contextual action theory in counselling

*Action et langage : la théorie de l'action en contexte pour le conseil*

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### ABSTRACT

Contextual action theory is presented as a conceptual framework useful for grounding the recent work in counselling and career development called Life Design. Based on the premise of the goal-directed nature of human action, this approach has links to language in theories of naive action and attribution, and theory of mind. Contextual action theory has an associated research method that has been used to generate a range of research studies that have described actions and projects in the career development and counselling domains. The link that contextual action theory provides between research and practice allows the identification of five tasks for the counselling practitioner informed by this approach.

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### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente la théorie de l'action en contexte comme un cadre de travail utile pour les récents développements du champ du conseil et de l'orientation sous l'angle du Life Design. Basé sur le principe que l'action humaine est naturellement orientée par les buts, cette approche se relie au langage dans les théories naïves de l'action et de l'attribution, et dans la théorie de l'esprit. La théorie de l'action en contexte comporte également une méthode

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de recherche qui a déjà produit une série d'études dans le champ du conseil de carrière s'appuyant sur les notions d'action et de projet. Le lien entre théorie et pratique opéré dans cette approche permet enfin de dégager cinq tâches pour le conseiller.

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In their work, counsellors are mostly asked to help their clients to find their way in a variety of life contexts including education, occupation, relationship, and family, over the life span. Their task is defined by the client's quest and by the rules and prescriptions of the counselling profession. Counsellors and clients engage in the counselling process primarily by doing things together while relying on language in their verbal communication. Thus, it is important for any conceptualizing in counselling that theory and practice address both language and speaking, on the one hand, and doing things, behaving or engaging in activity, on the other.

The importance of language and action in the development and construction of the person and in counselling has been highlighted in recent international work in understanding career and career interventions (Savickas et al., 2009). Notably, this work is represented in the social constructionist perspective known as "Life Design," which recognizes that one's occupational life and other aspects of one's life are constructed in parallel. The reasons for the shift in career development theory and career counselling that have sparked the life design and similar initiatives have been well articulated elsewhere (Collin & Young, 2000; Blustein, 2006), and are not reviewed here. However, this shift has led the Life Design innovators to suggest two questions to guide their research agenda, and by implication their conceptual framework and their practice. The first question, based on Guichard (2005), is "[w]hat are the factors and processes of a person's life construction?"; the second, "[h]ow may individuals best design their own lives in the human society in which they live?" The Life Design perspective affirms both language and action as contributing to the construction of the self and thus to life design, "[t]hrough activity, along with verbal discourse about these experiences, people construct themselves". This perspective highlights action and language as outcomes of counselling interventions, explicitly identifying narratability, activity, and intentionality as three of four goals of life-designing interventions; the fourth goal being adaptability. Thus, the Life Design perspective raises the questions of the place of action in self-construction and its relation to language. These questions are further compounded by the fact that counselling as a process relies heavily on language. Life design also invites a fuller articulation of the theoretical or conceptual sources that guide this perspective. One important theoretical source is based on Guichard's work (Guichard, 2005; Guichard & Dumora, 2008), in which the self is constructed through cognitive processes of language-based meaning making. Another conceptual source comes from contextual action theory (Valach, Young, & Lynam, 2002; Young et al., 2011b; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996, 2002), which sees counselling as a joint systemic goal-directed activity. This activity involves the manifest, subjective, social, verbal and non-verbal, conscious and unconscious, and short-, medium-, and long-term processes. These processes pertain equally to counselling and to life outside of counselling. Since contextual action theory has already been used to conceptualize career and counselling processes and conduct related research, it is a relevant basis for the emerging Life Design counselling.

In this article, we outline contextual action theory in order not only to address the issue of action and language in self-construction but also to provide conceptual grounding for the Life Design perspective from an action perspective. In doing so, we are able to articulate some guidelines for the use of contextual action theory in counselling, which combines action and language.

## 1. Action

Action theory is not a recent phenomenon. Marcel Blondel (1893) in France and William James (1890) in United States both coined the term "action theory." Developments in action theory, be it in philosophy (Taylor, 1964; Wittgenstein, 1953), psychology (Boesch, 1991; Bruner, 1990; Hacker,

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