TIPS, TOOLS, REFLECTIONS
AND CONVERSATIONS

Your career in psychology: A cognitive information processing approach

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This essay explores how principles of the Cognitive Information Processing career theory add to how one could manage one’s career in psychology. According to this theory, there are several components that may contribute to effective career choices, namely self-knowledge, occupational knowledge, generic information processing skills and metacognitions. This essay describes these components, and where suitable, provides additional information that relates specifically to a career in psychology.

Keywords: Cognitive Information Processing; career planning; psychology

Many of us who are interested in a career in psychology, or more specifically, ‘to become a psychologist’ have some kind of experience, or a person, that inspired us. This then becomes the driving force behind our ambition to eventually register with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) to practice as a psychologist. However, as one of my colleagues so succinctly put it: ‘Many are called, but few are chosen’. What happens to your career dreams and aspirations if you are not able to be trained as a professional psychologist who is registered with the HPCSA? The cognitive information processing approach to career decision-making may provide you with a framework to help you think creatively and broadly about how to plan and manage your career in psychology. The essay also provides some web resources to help you get started with specific aspects of career decisions with which you might currently be engaged.

The cognitive information processing approach to career decision-making was originally developed by Robert Reardon, Gary Peterson, and James Sampson, and published in the book entitled Career Development and Services: A cognitive
The basic assumption of the cognitive information processing theory is that all career decisions are problem-solving activities and that how we make decisions depends to a large extent on what we know and how we think. According to this approach, the outcome of career decisions is to close the gap between how things are now and how you would want them to be in future. For example, you are currently wanting to register as a clinical psychologist with the HPCSA – how do you get from where you are now (registered for your undergraduate or Honours degree in Psychology) to where you want to be (registered as a clinical psychologist)? The theory acknowledges that all decisions are complex and that decisions need to be taken in ambivalent, dynamic, and uncertain circumstances. This aspect of the theory highlights that one can never make the ‘right’ decision and that the best that you can do is to make an optimal decision in the light of your present circumstances and the information that you have at your disposal. The theory also emphasises that the emotional component of making decisions should not be under-estimated – decisions are, in other words, not just about gathering information, weighing the pros and cons and then making the ‘right’ decision. Indeed, how you feel about various aspects of your decision will also impact on the eventual decision that you make. When you need to make a decision in terms of your career, you might be feeling worried, anxious, confused, excited, and so on. These emotions play an important role in influencing how you think about your career.

The cognitive information processing approach describes several components that may contribute to effective career choices, namely self-knowledge, occupational knowledge, generic information processing skills, and metacognitions. You can choose to store everything to do with your career development in a career portfolio. An important aspect of the portfolio is to include your reflections about the reasons for including a specific item in your portfolio. For example, you see a newspaper advertisement for a career counsellor at the Department of Labour and you decide to keep this for future reference. Did you reflect on the skills required for this position? Did you make notes on what you still need to develop in order to apply for a similar position in future? Or, you complete an on-line activity to identify your interests and receive information about the meaning of this activity. Did you note the things that ‘stood out’ for you, for example interesting job titles that you would like to investigate further? Your portfolio can be printed or electronic, but the important thing is to reflect on your journey. For instance, you can use a blog to keep track of your findings and reflections. The aim of your portfolio in terms of the cognitive information processing approach is for you to see where you are now and what you still need to do to close the gap between now and where you want to be.
SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Self-knowledge is what you know about yourself in terms of what you like, what is important to you, what you are good at, and how you interact with others and your environment. Stated in psychological terms, these are your interests, values, skills, and personality.

Interests

There are various career theories that have emphasised the importance of matching your interests with your career choice, but the most researched theory in this area is the John Holland typology (RIASEC personality typology). Holland identified six different job environments and corresponding interest types, namely, Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Clerical. This theory states that people with specific types of interests (e.g., Social, Enterprising, and Clerical) will seek out matching work environments (also Social, Enterprising and Clerical) and that behaviour is determined by this interest-environment match. According to the South African Dictionary of Occupations (Taljaard & Von Mollendorf, 1987), the various occupations in psychology have different classifications. For example, research psychologists are mostly Investigative, Social, and Clerical and clinical, counselling, educational, and industrial psychologists are mostly Investigative, Social, and Enterprising. Counsellors are classified as Social, Enterprising, and Investigative. Although these classifications are often a broad brush-stroke rather than a refined line, what is important to note is that within psychology, there are different interests and related work environments and that you would need to figure out which one(s) appeal(s) to your interests in order for you to make an optimal choice.

It is important for you to continuously explore these aspects of yourself so that you can reflect on how they relate to your career goals. There are many ways for you to do so, such as introspection, reflection, and psychological assessments. Reardon, Lenz, Sampson, and Peterson (2009) list a number of salient points in terms of expanding your self-knowledge, including to avoid generalising from past experiences, not to pay too much attention to the voices of others, not to make career decisions when you are in crisis and to make use of professional counsellors to help you interpret your self-knowledge. ‘Not to pay too much attention to the voices of others’ might be a challenge if your value is that of collectivism or if you need to make your decisions within a collectivistic context. Your study funding might depend on others, or you might be responsible for others and it would be important for you to reflect on what is important to you and to others when you are making career decisions. As a student you may be struggling with a specific aspect of your studies (e.g., statistics), which may influence your decisions as to what you should include and exclude in terms of your future career in psychology. For example, ‘I am very bad at mathematics, so I
The cognitive information processing approach asks you to reflect on these events and to think about the validity of these statements in terms of the ‘bigger picture’ of your career.

**Skills**

The skills that you possess are also an important factor to take into consideration when making career decisions. Here it would be important for you not just to list skills, but also to articulate how you developed these skills and how you are able to apply them. When starting to think about your skills, you need to take into consideration any experience of yours and reflect on which skills you learnt and how you have since applied them. No experience is insignificant – as a human being you are continuously learning from these experiences. For example, if you are a distance education student, you have to be able to study independently, plan, and manage your own time, be responsible and balanced in terms of all the tasks that you have to complete, be able to communicate well (especially written communication), and you need to motivate yourself on a continuous basis. However, you might not get a lot of exposure to teamwork and oral communication opportunities – so you would need to plan for obtaining the necessary exposure in terms of these skills if you feel that they are important for your future career. A quick search on O*Net online (2008a, 2008b), an occupational information resource provided by the United States Department of Labour, states that the important skills for a clinical psychologist include active listening, reading, comprehension, social perceptiveness, speaking, critical thinking, service orientation, negotiation, complex problem solving, and writing. According to the same source, industrial and organisational psychologists would need the same skills, in addition to the ability to coordinate people and activities and time management. You can also peruse job advertisements and training application criteria to determine which skills are important for the area of psychology in which you are interested and to help you plan for developing the necessary skills. Your career portfolio can thus help you to keep track of the skills that you have to develop and have developed.

**Values**

Your values refer to that which is important to you and which can play an important role in your career decisions. Your awareness of your values could help you to identify or eliminate possible options. For example, if you value security, you would probably be uncomfortable owning your own business where your income cannot be guaranteed. If this is unavoidable, you would have to reflect on the measures that you will have to put in place to manage this potential values conflict. Many psychologists are employed in the corporate sector and if service to humanity is a non-negotiable value of yours, it may be difficult to accept this fast-paced and profit-driven environment.
Resources to help you reflect on your self-knowledge

There are many resources available on the web that could help you get started with improving your self-knowledge, and the following list includes just a small sample. Note that not all ‘assessments’ on the web are valid – view them in terms of gathering information about yourself. They cannot tell you ‘who you are’! This makes it important for you to reflect on your findings and to use many different ways of getting to know yourself. Part of your development as employee and consumer is the ability to evaluate information that you find from other sources in terms of your own needs. The following list of resources is to help you get started with your journey:

- Pace Careers Centre (http://www.pacecareers.com/careercentre/)
  This website contains a link to an ‘interest’ questionnaire that could assist you in linking your interests to specific job titles. The website also contains information about the various job titles.
  Click on the ‘Questionnaire’ button on the left to register as a user and then complete the interest questionnaire.

- Windmills Interactive (http://www.windmillsonline.co.uk/interactive/)
  This website helps you to explore the following questions: Where am I? What sort of life do I want? How can I start working towards my kind of life?

- Keirsey Temperament Sorter (http://www.keirsey.com/)
  The Keirsey Temperament Sorter is a widely used personality ‘sorter’. This website allows you to take the assessment free of charge and provides you with a mini-report.

- Future proof your career (http://www.futureproofyourcareer.com/)
  This assessment provides information about your personality, abilities, and possible fields of work. It also indicates how strong you are in terms of specific knowledge-age skills (for example, communication, adaptability, team work, computer literacy, and learning).

OCCUPATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Reardon et al. (2009) define occupation as ‘a group of similar positions found in different industries or organizations’ (p. 7) and emphasise that occupations change over time, while new ones are created and old ones disappear as the labour market changes. They mention something very important to keep in mind when you are gathering information about occupations, namely that occupational information is not an exact science. This means that you would need to have multiple sources of information to make an optimal decision. One of the ways that you can gather occupational information is by reading about it in print or on the internet. There are many countries that have national projects and programmes that gather and
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publish occupational information, but in South Africa you would have to be fairly
knowledgable about various information sources to find out more about different
occupations. The following are some general occupational information sites, and
sites with information related specifically to options in psychology that you could
consider:

- General
  - PACE Careers Centre (http://www.pacecareers.com/careercebtre)

- Psychology-specific
  - Psychology @ Unisa (http://www.unisa.ac.za/default.asp?Cmd=ViewConte
    nt&ContentID=15330)

  - Johann Louw from the University of Cape Town’s Psychology Department
    wrote a booklet called Careers in Applied Psychology. It is available at

  - The Professional Board for Psychology publishes information on their
    website about registration with it as a professional psychologist or
    counsellor. Their address is http://www.hpcsa.co.za/board_psychology.
    php. Click on Policy guidelines for information about various policies
    related to the practice of counselling and psychology. The National Board
    Exams page also lists all the required reading for the examinations and
    provide for interesting reading for prospective practitioners.

The American Psychological Association (APA) publishes a brochure called
Careers in Psychology (http://www.apa.org/careers/resources/guides/careers.aspx)
that describes what psychology is, as well as the nature of work in psychology
and where training in psychology can be applied. There are also regular articles
about careers in psychology, for example Psychology’s Growth Careers (http://
www.apa.org/monitor/2008/04/careers.aspx). Even though these resources are
specifically developed for a North American audience, they provide comprehensive
and insightful information about the various specialisation areas within the field of
psychology.

Once you know more about the different areas in psychology, you could also talk
to individuals who have studied psychology and are working in fields in which you
are interested. You could ask them how they got to where they are, what they enjoy
(and do not enjoy) about their current jobs, what recommendations they could give
to those starting in this field. You may wish to ask other questions you deem to be
relevant to your particular situation. Formally this process is known as ‘informational
interviewing’ and the process will help you to gather the puzzle pieces that you
need to move from where you are now to where you want to be. Should you not
be selected for professional training in psychology, this process is also useful for
adding or eliminating other career options.

Your next step would be to take a look at the educational options. Even though
you may be completing your undergraduate or Honours studies through a particular
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university, it is not guaranteed that you will continue with Masters at that same university. You should therefore research the options available at other institutions on this level. You might also be looking at adding qualifications to your undergraduate and Honours degree to add value to your degree and make yourself more marketable in terms of employment. Decisions about available educational options do not only apply at postgraduate level – at most universities psychology can be taken as a major for different undergraduate degrees. Examples include the Bachelor of Arts (BA) General, BA (Health Sciences and Social Services), Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Science (BSc) and the Bachelor of Business Administration degrees. Your choice would depend on your future career goals, what you have learnt so far about yourself and the occupational information that you have gathered.

GENERIC INFORMATION PROCESSING SKILLS

According to the Cognitive Information Processing career theory, the decision skills domain uses information from the self-knowledge and occupational knowledge domains to make decisions about your career. The theory also recognises that there are personal, social, and family reasons for not being able to make effective decisions. This theory makes use of the CASVE (Communication, Analysis, Synthesis, Valuing, and Execution) cycle as a way for one to make a specific decision. The Communication phase is when you become aware that you have to make a decision so that you can close the gap between where you are now and where you want to be. The communication could be from within yourself (e.g., you feel dissatisfied with your current type of work because you are not making a difference in people’s lives) or it could be communication from the outside (e.g., your employer requires you to study further to register with the HPCSA). In the Analysis phase, you improve your self-knowledge and knowledge about different options. In addition to this, you also make connections between your knowledge about yourself and knowledge about different options. For example, you could start thinking about yourself and who you are in relation to the different fields in psychology – are you a clinical psychologist, or an industrial psychologist or a career coach?

During the Synthesis phase, you first expand and then narrow down the options that you have at your disposal to solve your career problem. Reardon et al. (2009) suggest that you identify the options that in some way relate to your interests, values and skills. You then narrow down these options to a few that you think may narrow the gap between where you are now and where you want to be. The Valuing phase involves three aspects: evaluating the different options that you identified in terms of their costs and benefits for yourself and others; thinking about what is morally right or wrong about each option and then evaluating and ranking each option in terms of how much they could contribute to closing the gap that you identified. The final phase, Execution, involves taking action to implement your choice. Actions in
this phase could be to compose a written plan, gaining practical experience and then implementing the option you choose. The CASVE cycle is a continuous one that allows you to re-evaluate previous decisions.

**METACOGNITIONS**

The Cognitive Information Processing theory posits that without the executive processing domain – or thinking about your thinking (metacognitions), effective career decision-making is not possible. There are three specific skills within this domain that are important for career decision-making: Self-talk, self-awareness, and control and monitoring. *Self-talk* relates to Albert Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy, and in terms of your career decision-making is about you believing that you can make effective career decisions. For example, ‘I am able to gather the information that I need to decide whether to apply for a Master’s programme in Clinical Psychology’. *Self-awareness* is being aware of your feelings in terms of your career decisions. For example, after completing volunteer work at a homeless shelter, you become aware that you are quite angry and you relate this to the fact that there is so much injustice in the world – you then explore options in terms of psychology that could help you do something about these injustices. *Control and monitoring* is about knowing when to make decisions and take action, and when to pause and gather more information. Reardon et al. (2009) describes this as the balance between impulsivity (taking decisions too soon) and compulsivity (never going over to action because you are obsessing about the information) in career decision-making.

**FURTHER RESOURCES**

There are several books that could help you plan and manage your career in psychology:


CONCLUSION

It should be clear from this essay that there is a gap between knowing that you want to be a psychologist and actually getting there, and that there are many things that you can do to reframe the way in which you think about your career should you not be selected for a professional training programme in Psychology. Reardon et al. (2009) mention that each individual should have their own personal career theory, in other words, your unique way of thinking about your career and how you should be planning and developing it. It can be frightening and exciting to start thinking about the steps that you need to take to close the gap between where you are now and where you want to be, but if you do not start taking those steps, then your future career vision might remain a vision.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Leza Deyzel is currently registered for the first year of the MSc in Psychology with specialisation in Research Consultation at Unisa. Her research interests are related to the application of technology in career counselling and how individuals make meaning of their life, study and work experiences through the use of reflective portfolios. She is the e-counsellor at the Unisa Directorate for Counselling, Career & Academic Development.

REFERENCES


