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Traditional Career Development Models Lack the African Woman Voice

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Abstract

Research in careers is increasing, though there is still a paucity of research focusing on the career development of African women. The purpose of this article is to critically review selected theories of career development, critique the methodologies used to generate such knowledge, and recommend a model that is appropriate for the African woman career research. The selected age/ stage career theories examined in this article were tested on different population samples with different backgrounds, using positivistic methodologies. They, therefore, remain decontextualized when transposed directly to the African context. This article submits that expanding extant literature on career development requires deconstructing, constructing and reconstructing career development theory by creating new knowledge using epistemologies and methodologies that allow African women to construct their own theories about their career development experiences.

Keywords: African women, career development theories, the missing voice, critique, African epistemologies and methods

Traditional Career Development Models Lack the African Woman Voice

Postcolonial indigenous research advocates a process of decolonizing and indigenizing Euro-Western research methodologies (Chilisa, 2012). Indigenization is a process that involves a critique of and resistance to the colonisation and supremacy of Euro-Western methodologies, and the call for adapting orthodox methodologies by including perspectives and methods that draw from the indigenous knowledge, languages, metaphors, worldviews, experiences and philosophies of the former colonised, historically oppressed and marginalized social groups (Chilisa, 2012). Applied to the career psychology of women, this refers to the need of fresh ways of studying career development that are significant to the African woman and her environment.

Afrocentricity, the proposed view to understanding career development of women places African ways of perceiving reality, ways of knowing, and value systems on an equal footing with other scholarly examinations of human experience (Baugh & Guion, 2006). Afrocentric methodologies require researchers to develop relationships with the research subjects and reaffirm those relationships using methods that are not orthodoxly used with Western populations. This approach is collaborative, allowing the community to participate and provide input during all stages of the research process (Baugh & Guion, 2006), in line with the principles of social constructivism.

Meanwhile, mainstream career research is largely grounded in post-positivism, which reflects decontextualized and reductionist perspectives of career behaviour (Stead & Watson, 2017). Post-positivism, supportive of quantitative research designs, applied in career psychology continues to reflect the perspective and reality of the samples and populations studied. Even with claims of using social constructivism in career research sometimes, the existing career theories still have a gap in terms of explaining the career development of African populations, as social constructivist research is culture-bound (Holdstock, 2000). In challenging Western psychologists to acknowledge the right of people to differ individually as well as collectively, Holdstock (2000) renewed the call for the development of indigenous psychologies or a global community psychology. I join this discussion at a time when social constructionism as an epistemology promises to give voice to the voiceless and is strongly advocated for, in lieu of its impending contribution in the field of career psychology, as evidenced by theorists such as Mainiero and Sullivan (2005), and Savickas (2013) and Sharf (2010). I thus intend to expand on their works in recommending an approach to career development of women that is more conducive for women in Africa, to bridge the gap of the missing voices.

This article aims to firstly, critique the selected career development models. These are Super (1957) and Levinson's (1978) age or stage career development theories. These theories were developed and adopted by middle-class scholars for privileged populations and socioeconomic classes (Blustein et al., 2005). Secondly, the article focuses on their applicability to the career development of African women. Thirdly, an Afrocentric approach that supports social constructionism in the creation of knowledge about career development

is advocated.

The thesis statement of this article is that African women with different backgrounds, national cultures, identities, and communities do not fit neatly into the traditional age/stage models of career development, which were developed in different contexts using positivist methodologies. This claim is supported by evidence that the career development models discussed were adopted from countries such as the United States of America, which is a completely different context to that of Africa, using different samples with different backgrounds. I also argue for a social constructivist approach that allows for women with missing voices in career theory to construct their reality based on their true stories.

Literature Review

The traditional age/stage models and theories assumed that people's lives follow a linear equation, without due consideration for the contextual factors that may result in the majority of African women not following the same career structures that they proposed (Erikson, 1963; Levinson, 1978; Super, 1957). Thus, the career and life structures that these theorists describe may not be appropriate for all women from different contextual backgrounds. Gilligan (1982), a feminist critique of the traditional psychological theory stated that whilst current theory brightly illuminates the line and the logic of the boy's thought, it casts scant light on that of the girl's. Thus, expanding a new line of interpretation, based on the imagery of a woman's thought processes and life experiences will influence career development theory and practice (Gilligan, 1982).

A call for what Kim and Berry (1993) and Holdstock (2000) called indigenous psychology, does not separate psychology from the local conditions of the people is imminent. Kim and Berry (1993) defined indigenous psychology as "the scientific study of human behaviour or mind that is native, that is not conveyed from other regions, and that is designed for its people" (p. 2). The indigenous psychology approach will prevent career researchers from ignoring differences in meanings that people attach to their career decisions. Advocating for indigenous psychology further implies using methodologies applicable to local conditions and local communities, which includes not just having the African voice, but also paying attention to the means of getting to those voices (Chinyamurindi, 2012). There is thus a need for the evolution of career theory, to focus not only on methodologies, but additional implied epistemological challenges brought about by this evolution of career theory in Africa, which should be addressed. As Stead and Watson (2017) indicated, one does not generate contextually appropriate knowledge merely by having African samples, or by determining the meaning of existing approaches in the African context, on the contrary, by devising new theories, constructs and career interventions that are context-specific. Below is the discussion of Super (1957) and Levinson (1978) age or stage career development theories.

Super and Levinson's Age/Stage Career Development Theories

These two theories have emerged as the most popular in career stage research. The common underlying assumption behind these stage/age theories is that there are a series of predictable tasks that occur at more or less predictable times during the course of one's career (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).

According to Erikson (1963), during the early career phase, young adults focus on establishing their careers, whilst simultaneously attending to intimacy versus isolation issues. Super and Levinson borrowed from Erikson (1963) and Schein (1978) theories of human development, who both agreed that during the early career phase, young adults are faced with the task of managing multiple roles, namely work, family, and community engagement.

Super (1957; 1990) proposed a lifespan developmental model of career development that focuses on self-concept. According to Super (1978), people develop in five stages; growth (4-14 years), exploration (15-24 years), establishment (25-44 years), maintenance (45-65 years), and disengagement (65 years and above). Super (1990) described self-concept as a product of complex interactions amongst factors such as physical and mental growth, personal experiences, and environmental characteristics and stimulation at each of the stages. With regards to vocational choices, Super (1990) explained that between 15 and 24 years of age, an individual passes through a development stage to form, specify, and implement vocational preferences (Super, 1990). Hall (1986) refers to this stage as an initial exploratory and trial activity in early adulthood, in which career-related information is gathered, hypotheses about the self are tested, career plans are made, and decisions are taken that will lead to a personally meaningful work life. As a result, individuals are theoretically expected to settle into a routine after a phase of career exploration (Hodkinson et al., 1996). According to Hodkinson et al. (1996) and Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), routines can be

- (i) confirmatory (i.e. original choices and the path chosen become engrained),
- (ii) contradictory (i.e. consider a different career),
- (iii) accepting (of a career which was previously reluctantly chosen),
- (iv) dislocating (i.e. against one's identity but without being able to initiate a transformation), and
- (v) evolutionary (i.e. gradual changes without changes being contradictory or dislocating). This also implies that routines will change or be disrupted, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

In this context, Hall (1986) discusses turning points, which can be

- (i) structural (e.g. leaving school),
- (ii) incidental (i.e. outside one's control), or
- (iii) deliberate decisions (i.e. within a person's control) of varying duration.

Despite the occurrence of turning points, people develop an individual career conception over time (Brousseau et al., 1996). According to Brousseau et al. (1996), one cannot differentiate between a linear, expert, spiral, and transitory career concept.

As Super's theory was validated on White Americans, and thus focused on White Americans and their life perspective and experiences during development, its application with such clear western principles becomes inapplicable in a context different to the western context. Ultimately, such a theory cannot be generalised to other contexts, like the African context, that are different to the western context as the contextual factors such as culture, language and psycho-social factors differ as postulated by Stead and Watson (1998).

Levinson (1978), on the other hand, developed a comprehensive theory of adult development, referred to as the Seasons of Life theory, which identified stages and growth that occur well into the adult years. His belief was that adults follow a life structure or pattern that is comprised of one's social interactions, relationships, and work life. This life structure is constantly influenced by several stages of life. The two recurring seasons in life that Levinson highlighted were the Stable Period, or a time of consistency, when a person makes essential life decisions, and the Transitional Period, or the end of a certain life stage and the start of a new one (Levinson, 1978).

Levinson identified seven specific stages of adult development in his theory of the Seasons of Life. These stages include the following: early adult transition (17-22 years), entering the adult world (22-28 years), age 30 transition (28-33), settling down (33-40), midlife transition (40-45), entering middle adulthood (45-50), and late adulthood (60+).

Though Super (1980) and Levinson (1978)'s theories have received support from the community of career researchers and practitioners, they have, however, received criticism from feminists such as O'Neil et al. (2008), and White (1995). O'Neil et al. (2008) argued against the assumption of predictable tasks that happen at predictable times in people's lives. Thus, Levinson and Supers' theories are criticized for proposing a linear progression through a series of life stages based on male patterns of behaviour (Doherty & Manfredi, 2010). These models emphasize individual achievement, continuous employment, and progression, while women's lives are characterized by breaks, late starts, transitions and interrupted employment consistent with Bimrose et al. (2013).

Despite their contribution, evidence in support of Super and Levinson's theories to the field of career development has only been moderate. This is due to the paucity of research that directly tests these two career stage models in different contexts and the limitations associated with age stage models (Smart, 1996) and less emphasis on contextual factors as highlighted by Stead and Watson (1998). Furthermore, regardless of the attention given to these models, both of which are postulated to be applicable to women and men, almost none of the empirical investigations have identified women as their focus as emphasised by Ornstein and Isabella (1990). This is difficult because of the questions raised regarding the generalisability and transferability of male career development models to women (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Literature reviews by Astin (1984), Betz and Fitzgerald (1987), and Gutek and Larwood (1987) draw attention to the differences between men and women on various career indices. Therefore, to continue to assume that female concerns are identical to those of males ignores the unique career psychology of women.

Stead and Watson (1998)'s argument against the appropriateness of Super's life span, life space approach theory, is its validity based on a sample which varied from the Africans. Stead and Watson (1998) instead suggested that the meanings of core concepts in Super's theory, such as self-concept, should be re-evaluated to be more relevant to Africans, and only then could they be more appropriate for use by career counsellors and researchers from Africa, and this is my line of argument.

Recent articulations from Herr et al. (2004) and Savickas (2002) regarding Super's theory have called for a stronger emphasis on the effects of social context and the reciprocal influence between the person and the environment as postulated by Holland's theory (1992). Consequently, the view of a career as a linear equation, as suggested by these traditional career paths, has become a myth rather than reality in today's society, where people change jobs much more frequently than in the past. Instead of a single occupational choice, career construction has become the norm, as encapsulated in Savickas (2002), which is said to be an advancement of Super's theory.

Figure 1 below presents graphically the criticisms of the traditional (Western) career development theories, starting from their research paradigms, their research designs, their ontology, epistemologies, and methodologies. We therefore cannot separate the knowledge generated from the knowers, and the manner in which the knowledge is generated.

Our next focus is on the applicability of these models to the career development of African women.

The Applicability of Traditional Theories of Career Development to African Women

Super and Levinson's career stage models have been criticized for excluding some voices and generalizing about the white male experience. It ignores the influence of family roles and expectations in women's lives when studying their career development. Factors such as marriage and motherhood in women career development trajectories are strongly related to career attainment, innovation and commitment, and continue to represent the major factors that differentiate women's vocational behaviour from that of men (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996), a finding which is still relevant, two decades later.

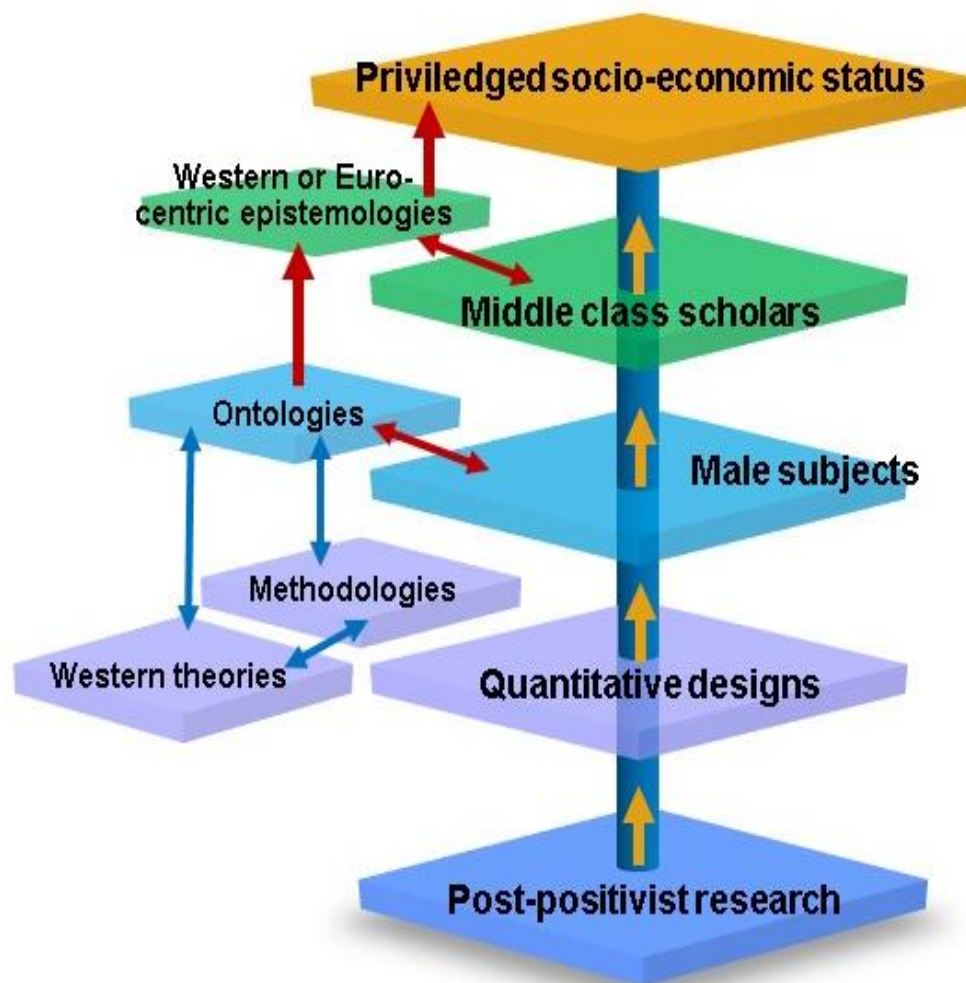
The accuracy of traditional career development theories and their applicability to the African context has thus been widely questioned (Chinyamurindi, 2012), for basing their results exclusively on studies of male participants (Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978; Schein, 1978). Maree and van der Westhuizen (2011) have maintained that the career development theories developed elsewhere cannot be transposed directly onto the South African situation.

Another explanation for the non-acceptance of these theories within the African context is the methodologies employed to arrive at findings. The majority of these studies employed quantitative surveys (Creed et al., 2002; Stead & Watson, 2017), and the quantitative approach is fraught with limitations, such as sampling and not taking contextual factors into consideration. Methodologies like psychometric tests were criticised for being culture-bound and thus inappropriate for people coming from different cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, using tests in the quest for objective data has resulted in fixed, linear, and stable models (Maree & Beck, 2004) which are not appropriate for African women and their challenges. Maree and Beck (2004) contend that the accepted linear career models are based on the archetypal male principle, symbolized by an arrow, whilst the corresponding female principle is represented by a spiral, with its allusion to the ebb and flow of life. These female perceptions and expectations challenge many of the conventional assumptions that have been made about career development.

Figure 1.

The Critiqued Previous Career Research Framework



From this discussion, it is evident that these theories have not been welcomed within the

African continent without criticism. There is therefore a need to expand thinking with regards to the career development of women, particularly in Africa, hence the Afrocentric approach to the career research of women, using African epistemologies and methodologies that are inductive and appropriate to this context.

A Recommended Afrocentric Model to the Career Development of Women

From an epistemological level, critiques of existing career theory, including the discourse about work and careers, have emerged from social constructionist perspectives (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 2009). The hallmark of these critiques is the questioning of the existing theories and underlying assumptions, and thus the extant literature. The social constructionist critique encourages a more relativist understanding of knowledge, which acknowledges the assumptions that shape the enquiry and the influence of culture. Social constructionist perspectives seek to unpack how knowledge is constructed, taking into consideration social and political discourses that frame how questions are asked and answered (Blustein et al., 2004). The challenge for indigenous researchers lies in the integration of indigenous perspectives into the major paradigms because of the underlying epistemologies, ontologies, methodologies and axiologies of such paradigms (Wilson, 2008). Perspectives from Africa share a common understanding of an indigenous research paradigm informed by relational ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Chilisa, 2012).

Constructivists believe that we are shaped by our life experiences, which will always result in the knowledge we generate as researchers, and in the data generated by our subjects (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). In my view, valid and acceptable knowledge is information obtained directly from those experiencing the phenomenon being studied, and knowledge is therefore relative. Blaikie (2000) also indicates that in constructivism, knowledge is seen to be derived from everyday concepts and meanings. The social investigator goes into the social world to understand the socially constructed meanings, and then re-interprets these meanings in social scientific language. I argue that different approaches will enhance our understanding and research methods reflecting broader philosophical orientations will be more appropriate for previously excluded voices, in line with feminists such as Bimrose et al. (2013) and O'Neil et al. (2008).

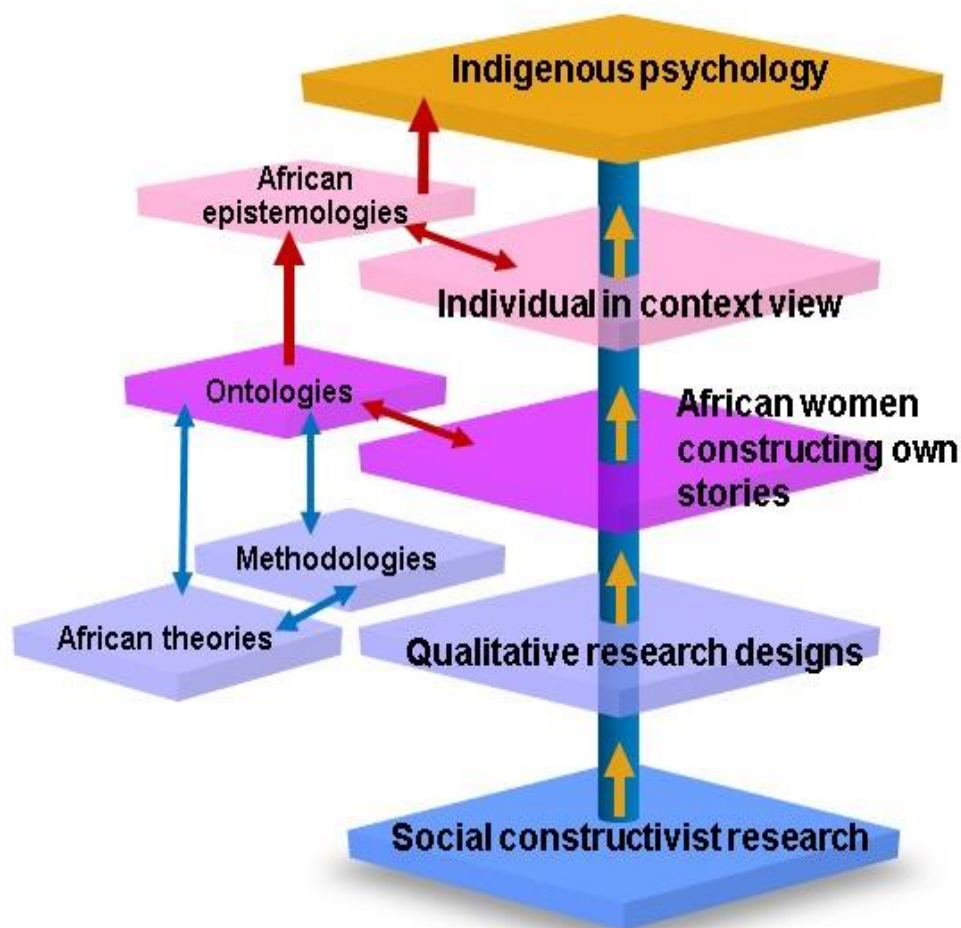
Investigating and understanding the everyday world of women's experiences is paramount to feminism and feminist research (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Stanley and Wise (1993) reflect the prevailing view of feminists, contending that what is needed is a "woman's language", a language of experience, which must come from exploring women's personal, everyday life experiences. The proposed Afrocentric approach to career development, as an alternative to the traditional models, is discussed below in Figure 2.

The failure of traditional age/stage career models and frameworks to reflect the lived experiences of women has led female researchers in Africa and other regions to develop contemporary models that can give authentic expression and representation to women (Bostock, 2014; Gallos, 1989; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Ogbogu & Bisiriyu, 2012; O'Leary, 1997). African feminism, a feminist epistemology which validates the experiences of women of African origin against a mainstream feminist discourse (Goredema, 2009), highlights the

discernible difference between women who were colonized and those who were deemed the colonizers. Feminist epistemology puts women at the centre of the research process, in order for generalizations to be made about women (Brooks, 2006; Garko, 1999), whilst acknowledging that women are not homogenous. This reality requires studying women's histories, present realities, and future aspirations. Feminist critiques, such as Blustein et al. (2005) and Patton and McMahon (2014), have posed a similar question regarding the relevance and adequacy of existing career development models and theories in confronting a world where the oppression and marginalization of women is the norm.

Figure 2.

The Proposed Afrocentric Approach to Studying Career Development of Women



O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005), came up with a career development theory for women that proposed that women's careers are made up of three age-related phases, namely idealistic achievement (24-35), pragmatic endurance (36-45), and re-inventive contribution (46-60). They found that while the salient issues in each phase differ, women in all three phases were concerned with succeeding in both their careers and their relationships. The results of their research show that women's careers develop according to three distinct age-related phases, which are characterised by differences in career patterns, loci, contexts, and beliefs. Two other contemporary theorists, Ogbogu and Bisiriyu (2012), explain career development from women's perspective and consider the broader social or psychological context.

Additionally, Savickas (2002) proposes another career construction theory attempted to expand and contextualise Super's theory. In terms of Savickas' (2002) career construction theory, an individual's career development is based more on adaptation to his or her changing context than on the maturity of prescribed behaviours. Thus, Savickas (2002) used career adaptability instead of career maturity as careers are constructed. Savickas replaced the maintenance stage with the management stage, as the latter term suggests continuous adaptation. Savickas (2002) built on Super's notion of self-concept, which originated from personal construct theory. However, he adopted a constructivist perspective. Using social constructionism as a metatheory, construction theory views careers from a contextual perspective that sees people as self-organising, self-regulating, and self-defining (Savickas, 2005).

Furthermore, granted that women do not all progress through career stages in a linear and uniform fashion, their development cannot be restricted to age frameworks, such as Levinson (1978) and Super (1957; 1990). Individuals have different encounters in life, and thus to assume people of the same age will be doing similar tasks and activities, is a prejudiced assumption as women are not a homogenous group and thus do not have similar life experiences, consistent with (Sharf, 2010) a career construction theory. Taking Sharf's (2010) career construction theory, women's career life stories reflect predominant preoccupations related to each of the developmental stages of career adaptability.

Considering the uniqueness and diversity of the African culture, and the differences in women's backgrounds, it is impossible to have one career theory that explains the career development of women in Africa. I therefore strongly advocate for African feminism, a social movement whose aim is to increase the global consciousness that sympathizes with African women's histories, present realities and future expectations as shown in Figure 1.2 above. African feminism uses descriptive methods as they are deemed more conducive to getting the stories of African women as they call for openness in exploring women's experiences. In storytelling, individuals locate themselves as the primary narrator and character of their stories, and in this way, identity is constructed (McMahon et al., 2010). Feminist critiques challenge what is taken for granted and strive towards the acknowledgement of positioned knowledge and experiences. Feminist critiques such as Alcoff (1991), Carby (1987), Eagly (1987), and Gilligan (1982) have emphasised the importance of acknowledging women's voices, and the danger of the privileged speaking on behalf of the oppressed. Alcoff (1991) indicates that not only is location epistemologically salient, but certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous, referring particularly to privileged persons speaking for or on

behalf of less privileged persons. Alcoff (1991) states that this has helped to increase or reinforce the oppression of the group that is spoken for. For this reason, the act of the privileged speaking on behalf of the oppressed has been increasingly criticised by members of the oppressed groups. Carby (1987) posits that in order to gain a public voice as orators, black women had to confront the dominant domestic ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood, which had excluded them from the definition of a woman. According to her, there is a need to revisit the African feminist theory, and African women themselves need to reconstruct their definition of womanhood. Indigenous psychology as depicted in Figure 1.2 above, is therefore considered appropriate for studying the career development of African women, because it gives a voice to samples that would otherwise have been neglected. Secondly, it provides a contextual understanding, unlike the quantitative approach, which is prescriptive in nature and aims to match people with careers (Chinyamurindi, 2012).

The understanding of career development could be enhanced by using indigenous research, as it investigates the real-life context and concerns itself with vivid, dense, and full descriptions of the phenomenon being studied (Chilisa, 2012).

Conclusions

From this discussion, it is clear that while it may be beneficial for African career researchers to utilize and adapt theories and constructs developed elsewhere, it is vital that career theories deeply rooted in the African context are developed, in order to eliminate dependency on the theories that were tested in Western communities using methodologies appropriate to those contexts. These theories, though adapted to fit the African context, remain decontextualized, and fail to capture the essence of African people's lives. The generalization of these theories to wider populations has reflected an assumption that they are meaningful and relevant for different ethnicities and backgrounds (Stead & Watson, 1998).

Noteworthy is the reality that no single theory can adequately account for all the experiences of African women, given that each woman constructs her own story about her career development experiences. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of women's experiences based on their geographical locations, cultural backgrounds, demographic profiles, societal norms, skill levels, and other factors responsible for differences in women's behaviour makes it impossible to have a single theory that explains the career development journey of each woman in Africa. However, this article has highlighted the need for more research on career development models that take an "individual in context view" (McMahon et al., 2014, p. 30), and theories that recognize the individual, dynamic, relational, and complex nature of careers. These factors have been largely overlooked by existing career theories (Stead & Watson, 2017).

Constructivist career theorists agree that women's careers are constructed differently to those of men, and are therefore worthy of their own attention in research. Thus, from the researcher's perspective, who would like to make a contribution by investigating and understanding the everyday world of women's experiences, it is essential that indigenous

knowledge systems to be used. Future research that will expand on the meaning of career development for women in the African context is thus needed, as well as career researchers who will question the validity and generalizability of the male-oriented constructions of career development.

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