
New Questions for Vocational Psychology: Premises, Paradigms, and Practices

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Abstract

The innovative responses of vocational psychology and career counseling to the important questions raised by people living in information societies will continue the disciplines' tradition of helping individuals link their lives to the economic context. The questions pertaining to perspectives, paradigms, and practices arise mainly from the increasing dominance of "jobless work," which moves people from project to project and from one culture to another culture. These recurring transitions mean that individuals cannot maintain their employment, so they must maintain their employability and actively manage their careers through adaptability, intentionality, life-long learning, and autobiographical reasoning. The emerging practice of career counseling seems to take the general form of constructing career through small stories, deconstructing and reconstructing the small stories into a large story, and co-constructing intention and action to begin the next episode in that large story.

Keywords

employability, adaptability, career, constructionism

For contributors to this special issue of the *Journal of Career Assessment*, Professor Walsh posed a single question: "What are the next big questions in vocational psychology?" An answer comes to mind easily. How may clients and counselors deal with the numerous employment transitions that clients are likely to face during their working lives? For a decade, observers have been writing about the need for individuals to cope with the employment instability of the new economy, rising to prominence topics such as adaptability, employability, life-long learning, the psychological contract, and boundaryless careers. These constructs reflect the need for individuals in information societies to respond to the changes in the social organization of work brought about by the digital revolution. Less attention has been paid to how career counselors and vocational psychology researchers must also address the transformation from jobs to jobless work. Nevertheless, there is a parallel process occurring in which the new needs of clients prompt practitioners and researchers to consider new theories and techniques. Both clients and counselors face these changes with varying degrees of

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readiness and receptiveness. This special issue may actually be a means of increasing practitioners' and researchers' readiness for and receptivity to changes in their own work.

In this article, I first briefly describe the major transition faced by clients, practitioners, and researchers. Next, I examine the employment premise on which 20th century vocational psychology and career counseling rest. I follow this with consideration of practitioners' and researchers' perspective on career. Then I move to a consideration, in turn, of paradigms for research in vocational psychology and models for the practice of career counseling. So, the next section considers why vocational psychology and career counseling must ask new questions at this point in their histories. The answer you find is simple—the digital revolution.

The Digital Revolution

The digital revolution of the 21st century is changing the form of work and occupations in Western societies. Rapid advances in information technology and opening of world markets has produced a globalization of economies through which cultures influence each other to become more alike through trade, immigration, and exchange of information and ideas. Economic globalization is not only reshaping the social organization of work, it is changing health care insurance, pensions, and home ownership. While full-time employment remains the dominant form of work and long-term careers still exist, temporary and part-time work are increasingly common place following the flattening of the hierarchical corporation as an organizational structure for work. Old success formulas that described methods for obtaining and succeeding in a job no longer apply. The information societies of the 21st century require new thinking about work life because things once taken for granted are no longer guaranteed or, in some cases, even available. Understanding the pressures and problems faced by individuals in 21st century work assignments provides the platform for raising important questions for the applied science of vocational psychology and the profession of career counseling, the first of which asks about the premise that people will be employed in jobs.

The Premise of Employment in Jobs

Employment restructuring for production flexibility has affected jobs and workers (Kalleberg, Reynolds, & Marsden, 2003). Work has not disappeared, it is just being organized differently. The new emphasis is not on the job occupant and full-time employment, it is on the work as a project with a beginning assignment and an ending product. A prototype of jobless work as an assignment is making a motion picture. For that project, the producers assemble a large team of specialists with diverse talents and skills to work for a set period of time to make a movie. When the movie wraps, the team disassembles with each member seeking employment on another project. While actors and artists have always had assignments rather than jobs, this form of work is new to the general population.

The public now sees stable jobs being replaced by temporary assignments. More than half of Generation Y employees hold their first job for an average of 7 months (Saratoga Institute, 2000). This is not only true for emerging adults, but also for those who in previous times had stabilized in jobs and families. Of jobs started by workers between the ages of 33 and 38, 39% ended in less than a year, and 70% ended in fewer than 5 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). One in four workers has been with their current employer for less than a year. One in two workers has been with current employer for less than 5 years. According to a report published by the American Association of University Professors (2007), 46% of all professors are part-time and 65% of all faculty jobs are nontenure track. In 1969, just 3.3% of faculty appointments were nontenure track.

The idea of temporary assignments rather than permanent jobs is reflected in contemporary pop culture. Consider the example of television shows. During the second half of 20th century, television programs showed stability with plot, main story line, and character development. Viewers could

track the progress of characters and see the evolution of themes. Today, shows are built around incidents. *Law & Order* features no character development or overarching plot. The episodes are written to avoid these anchors so they can be shown and replayed in any order. The episodes concentrate on the crime, not the characters—the assignment not the job.

Employability

Given the rise of assignments and jobless work, vocational psychology must now focus attention on *employability* rather than *employment*. When assignments replace jobs the change in the social reorganization of work produces a new psychological contract between organizations and its members. This is because employment differs from employability. The psychological contract of employment involves a long-term relationship; employability involves a short-term transaction. Employment in a traditional job depends upon mastering some uniform body of occupational knowledge with specialized skills. Employability depends on mastering, for recurrent use, the general skills of getting, keeping, and doing an assignment. Employability requires basic skills such as communication and mathematic skills, higher order skills such as decision-making and problem-solving, and affective skills such as conscientiousness and honesty. In a flexible firm, employability depends on the ability to quickly apply these general skills to gain the particular occupational skills needed to perform diverse tasks. Resumes become skill portfolios rather than occupational histories. A good temporary assignment is one that adds to the worker's skills. The shift from employment in jobs to employability for assignments has implication for how practitioners and researchers conceptualize a career.

The Perspective on Career

Contingent and peripheral workers who perform assignments do not plan to work 30 years developing a career within the boundaries of one job or even one organization. Instead, during their lifetimes, they may expect to occupy at least 10 “jobs,” more properly called assignments. The new job market in an unsettled economy calls for viewing career not as a lifetime commitment to one employer but as a recurrent selling of services and skills to a series of employers who need projects completed. The *chores* of the agricultural era and the *jobs* of the industrial era may yield to the *projects* of the information era. Existing theories of career development do not adequately account for the uncertain and rapidly changing occupational structure nor do they address the needs of peripheral and external workers. Even for core workers, there is a decline in identifiable and predictable career routes. Established paths and identifiable scripts are disappearing. Rather than developing a stable life based on secure employment, today most workers must be adaptive in maintaining flexible employability through life-long learning and adapting to transitions. Rather than *developing a career* in a stable medium, they must *manage a career* in a fluid environment. While career planning goes with developing and unfolding a career, it does not fit as well with career management. Rather than make plans, individuals must look for possibilities. The adage of “prior planning prevents poor performance” is being replaced with the adage of “If you want to make God laugh, then make a plan.” So developmental theories of career are being superseded with theories that deal with “chaos” (Pryor & Bright, 2011) and “happenstance” (Krumboltz, 2009) rather than planning.

Existing theories of career do not adequately account for the uncertain and rapidly changing occupational structure nor do they address the needs of peripheral and external workers. The new social contract between organizations and workers has prompted management and human resource scholars to reconceptualize careers. Super's (1957) conceptualization of predictable stages with anticipated developmental tasks provided the career narrative for the last half of the 20th century. However, this story of stages and tasks dissolves with the loss of the identifiable scripts and predictable paths on which it was based. Books by scholars such as Hall (1996a) have proclaimed “The

career is dead, long live the career.” What is dead is Super’s (1957) meta-narrative of career stages. The story narrated by Super portrayed career as a value of hierarchical organizations. The company owned the employee’s career. Today, individuals own their careers. Accordingly, management scholars are reconceptualizing career from a predictable course through working lives to something that is boundaryless (Arthur, 1994), protean (Hall, 1996b), customized (Benko & Weisberg, 2007), kaleidoscope (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008), and portfolio (Handy, 1998). The new conceptualization of the career narrative transforms the story from one about maturation in stable medium to one about adaptation to a changing landscape. This transformation reflects more than a subtle shift in language. It requires a fundamental change in perspective from which the discipline can envision career with a new paradigm.

A Paradigm for Research

Vocational psychology during the 20th century rested on the epistemic paradigm of logical positivism, trying to emulate the natural sciences. Following the move to an information society and a digital age, some vocational psychologists prefer to maintain the dominance of this epistemic tradition. However, vocational psychology might be even more useful in the global economy by becoming a human science rooted in an epistemic paradigm of social constructionist. Adopting a constructionist paradigm provides a new perspective and affords innovative premises. Take as just one example, the idea of a “self.” The modern idea assumes that an essential self already exists within a person. At the beginning of the 20th century, vocational guidance adopted the epistemology of psychological essentialism in identifying traits that characterize the self and then constructed ability tests and interest inventories to measure the socially important traits. The idea of an essential self continued to serve vocational psychology well during the second half of the 20th century, especially in the form of Maslow’s (1954) self-actualization, Rogers’ (1951) self-discovery, and Super’s (1957) self-implementation. However, for careers in the 21st century that idea of unfolding an essential self could be replaced with the postmodern idea that an essential self does not exist a priori; instead, constructing a self is a life project. This view considers self to be a story, not a substance defined by a list of adjectives or profile of scores. Needless to state, self-actualization and self-construction offer fundamentally different perspectives on and prospects for career theory and intervention. If vocational psychology takes the perspective that employment is impermanent and changeable, then maybe it should also model the self as impermanent and changeable.

The social constructionist paradigm for the self and career makes available new core constructs for the study and management of 21st century work lives. Vocational psychologists who are looking beyond the positivist career narrative of personality traits and developmental stages are now formulating heuristic constructs intended to help clients understand and negotiate a life-course filled with transitions. These constructs include, but are not limited to, identity rather than personality, adaptability rather than maturity, intentionality rather than decidedness, stories rather than scores, and action rather than behavior. Management and human resource scholars are also reformulating the career narrative with new constructs of their own, including employability, life-long learning, emotional labor, emotional intelligence, life-role priorities, and family friendliness. Career counselors are also innovating their practices to address the needs of individuals designing working lives in the 21st century.

The Practice Model

Career intervention theories and techniques rise to prominence to the degree that they effectively address the important questions asked by people in a society. Over its history, career counselors’

response to societal questions has been to construct models and methods that link personal goals to economic activities of the society.

The first theory of career intervention emerged early in the 20th century to address a question asked by Western societies as they coped with industrialization, urbanization, and immigration: How may workers be efficiently matched to fitting work? The answer to this question came when Parson (1909) formulated the framework for vocational guidance. Over the next five decades, Parson's model for matching individuals to jobs evolved into the person-environment theory. Holland's (1959) congruence theory of vocational personality types and work environments brought the matching model to its pinnacle. Following World War II, the United States experienced the rise of suburban, middle-class individuals employed by hierarchical bureaucracies located in horizontal skyscrapers. Consequently, the theory of vocational development (Super, 1957) emerged in the middle of the 20th century to address the question of how to advance a career in one hierarchical organization or bureaucratic profession. Holland's (1997) theory of vocational choice and Super's (1990) theory of vocational development remain useful when considering how to match workers to occupations and how to develop careers within bureaucratic organizations.

Today, the big question that society asks of vocational psychology is "How might individuals cope with the re-organization of work and employment in multicultural information societies?" As the form of career changes from stability to mobility to reflect the labor needs of posttraditional societies, so too must the form of career intervention. Thus, reflective practitioners of career intervention are examining how career counseling theory and techniques may best help clients negotiate a lifetime of job changes without losing their sense of self and social identity.

The counseling profession's response to this big question requires a fundamental reordering of career intervention theory and practice envisioned from different perspectives and elaborated from new premises. The advance in career intervention will not be a quantitative increase; rather, it will be a qualitative change. This transformation in career intervention will be as substantial as when the matching model of vocational guidance for the industrial era replaced the friendly visit of the agricultural era and the developmental model of career education for the corporate era supplemented vocational guidance. The matching model and the developmental model rested on new perspectives and premises that fit their time. So, what might be the new practice of career intervention in the digital era?

The 21st century will surely witness the emergence of a new *general model* for career counseling designed for the fluid societies, flexible organizations, and multicultural contexts of the new millennium (Savickas, IN PRESS). Today, we have two well-established general models of career intervention: the vocational guidance of modernity and the career education of high modernity. The general model for vocational guidance is to: (a) enhance self-knowledge; (b) increase occupational information; and (c) match self to occupation. The general model for career education is to: (a) assess development status; (b) orient the individual to imminent developmental tasks; and (c) develop the attitudes, beliefs, and competencies needed to master those tasks.

To articulate a new general model for career counseling in the 21st century, one might begin by studying the emerging intervention models to discern their core structure. The first iteration of these 21st century models were rooted in psychological constructivism, especially those proposed by Cochran (1992), Neimeyer (1992), Peavy (1997), and Savickas (1997). The second iteration of constructionist, ecological, and systemic models for career counseling as proposed by Cook, O'Brien, and Heppner (2004); Patton and McMahon (2006); Pryor and Bright (2005); and Young and Valach (1996). And finally, the third iteration of career counseling models concentrate on narratives, especially those proposed by Brott (2001), Cochran (1997), Guichard (2008), and Savickas (IN PRESS).

Looking at similarities and themes in these specific models, I have attempted to outline the structure of the new general model of career counseling. The general model for career counseling seems

to be to: (a) *construct* career through small stories; (b) *deconstruct and reconstruct* the small stories into a large story; and (c) *co-construct* the next episode in the story. Let us consider each element in turn, starting with construction of a career story.

When individuals are dislocated from their current stories, they begin narrative processing of their biographies. Practitioners ask clients to narrate micronarratives, or tell small stories, that demonstrate how they have constructed their self, identity, and career. In some cases, client stories include dominating demands or insidious ideas that suppress more life-enhancing alternatives. Practitioners must be sensitive to ideological biases regarding gender, race, and social status. When stories require deconstruction, the goal is not to destroy the story but to access different meanings and new knowledge that open up possibilities and restart stalled initiatives. Having listened closely to how a client constructs her or his career story, and maybe deconstructing some of its ideas and incidents, counselor then reconstruct the small stories into a large story that confers personal meaning and social mattering by telling of pattern and progress in the life. This identity narrative highlights the occupational plot and career theme in the sequence of small stories. The practitioner begins co-construction by presenting to the client a draft of the reconstructed identity narrative, calling it a "life portrait." Reflecting on the life portrait typically leads to the client editing the identity narrative. The co-construction of the life portrait seeks to incorporate the current dislocation in a way that clarifies priorities, mobilizes central tendencies, and increases the possibility of transformation and development. This occurs as client moves in meaning open new vistas and reveal pivotal pathways. With new found clarity, the client envisions the next scene, forms intentions, and begins to act. A good story about the self encourages a client to make career transitions while holding onto a self that is even more vital and intentional. A revised identity narrative enables an individual to meet the uncertainties of transition with comforts recalled from the past. Career counseling thus forges links to the world that lies ahead by promoting intention and action. Through action, not verbal expressions of decidedness, clients engage the world. Going further and deeper into the world answers the questions brought to counseling as it prompts further self-making, identity shaping, and career constructing.

Summary

The applied science of vocational psychology and the profession of career counseling have been asking new questions during the first decade of the 21st century. The questions arise from the demise of jobs. The employment premise of matching individuals to jobs is fading as the digital revolution produces jobless work. In response to the recurring transitions that they will face as they move from project to project, individuals cannot maintain their employment, so they must maintain their employability. As they do so, they also must realize that they, not the company, owns their careers. Thus, individuals must actively manage their possibilities through adaptability, intentionality, life-long learning, and autobiographical reasoning. To assist clients deal with transitions, happenstance, and even chaos, counselors are developing new intervention theories and techniques. The emerging practice of career counseling seems to take the general form of constructing career through small stories, deconstructing and reconstructing the small stories into a large story, and co-constructing intention and action to begin the next episode in that large story. Vocational psychology and career counseling's innovative responses to the important questions raised by people living in information societies will continue the discipline's tradition of helping individuals link their lives to the economic circumstances that surround them.

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