

David Tiedeman: The First Constructivist Career Counselor

When an individual of deep scholarship and intellectual daring plunges ahead of the learned community that he is addressing, he does not immediately receive the honor he deserves. Instead, he may blend undistinguished into the scholarly landscape, and somehow become taken for granted. Something like this has happened to the scholarly writings of David Valentine Tiedeman. I consider Tiedeman to be the first psychologist to apply constructivist epistemology to the comprehension of careers making him in my estimation the first constructivist career counselor. In reconceptualizing the meaning of “career,” Tiedeman broke intellectual chains inherited from the past to clear a new path into the future. He pointed the counseling profession in a new direction, seeing what was to be avoided and what was to be done. When others lagged behind, he went on by himself.

In writing about the “cultivation of career” Tiedeman (1964) explained two meanings of career. He reiterated the traditional perspective that career views career as a sequence of occupational positions. Then, from the perspective of new science, he redefined career as “the development of cognitive structures by a person which allow him to engage in the exercise of initiative at work with a feeling of fulfilling his desires” (p. 2). This second definition of career moves it to the interior of person. The logical positivist conception of career comes from the position of external observer of vocational behavior who can see an individual’s progression of positions recorded on a curriculum vita. Tiedeman’s social constructionist perspective see career from a subjective position, emphasizing the continuity that the actor imposes on the series of occupation positions. Tiedeman then explains that his is a linguistic frame for career development, referring to his ideas about careers as a language. This move, of course, implies

that career is constructed linguistically as we talk it into existence. This leads to his most powerful idea, namely that “career is guided thought that lends direction to a person’s vocational behavior”(1964, p. 18). Thus, Tiedeman provided the career field, or at least its constructivist branch, to the seminal insight that career is the imposition of direction on vocational behavior.

Purposeful Action

Tiedeman elaborated the idea that career mentation guides behavior into the *paradigm of purposeful action*. Tiedeman process theory puts purpose not work as central construct of career. Through purposing or purposeful action, Tiedeman placed career into vocational development. The central concern of this paradigm addressed discontinuity in vocational life by transforming it into career. Vocational life presents individuals with a series of discontinuities as they move from school to work, from occupation to occupation, and from job to job. These discontinuities in work role may be anticipated as developmental tasks, predicted as normative transition, or experiences as unexpected trauma.

Guidance must help individual link these discontinuities into chains for their own advantage. Guidance helps individuals to evolve their purpose, the link that takes them from currently experienced to the currently desired. The goal of guidance is to “get students to think in terms of purpose”(p. 21). Get students to compare currently experienced to desired and “note a difference”. Upon noting a difference, student can then choose, develop, modify, and performs to move where he thinks he might like to be.

Tiedeman noted how Donald Super took a huge step in placing the person as an agent in vocational development. This took us from occupational choice to vocational development. Super produced a taxonomy of discontinuities, structure presently arranged by society. Tiedeman wanted career not vocation to be central issue in vocational psychology, he wanted to

place the person not the structure of developmental tasks to central and emphasized the election and cultivation of structure by the persons, thus career.

He viewed development of the self as a construction, the individual being a self-organizing system, in which whole organizes its parts. RIASEC puts emphasis on parts not whole (Miller-Tiedeman and Tiedeman, (1985). In Harvard Educational Review in 1952, David Tiedeman reviewed Ginzberg's "Occupational Choice: An Approach to a General Theory. In that review, he explained that Ginzberg misunderstood statistics. Tiedeman explained that statistics provide a useful logical framework for understanding the validity of many concepts. However,"we shall never see a statistic that will explain how a particular individual decides upon an occupation or enables one to understand what work really means to the individual..." (P. 189). The career theories of Roe, Holland, and Super are unarticulated parts each in a Newtonian science "neat box. Tiedeman strove to integrate career theory into a general process theory in which quantum, not Newtonian, principles of process hold sway. Tiedeman began work on process theory of career in 1961 paper. In this paper, he used terms such as "career consciousness" and "career constructionism" (Tiedeman and Miller-Tiedeman, 1984).