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Life Portraits from Donald Super's Career Pattern Study

Why do young people aspire to different types of work? Why do they choose a particular occupation? How do they resolve problems that they encounter as they make the transition from school to work and adjust to a job? What processes do they use to stabilize and maintain themselves in an occupational position? These persistent and puzzling questions were addressed by Donald E. Super (1957) in his landmark book on The Psychology of Careers. In this book, he used conclusions from an extensive review of the available literature to formulate tentative answers to these questions. He then synthesized these conclusions into a theory of careers, one with practical implications for fostering human development by means of work. To test his theory, Super, along with numerous students and colleagues, conducted a study of career patterns that dominated the remainder of his own career.

The case study project reported herein culminates in a program of research known as the Career Pattern Study (Super, 1985). This examined the puzzling questions relating to career construction by using a prospective, longitudinal, case-study structure to examine the interaction between personality and work over a period of 50 years. Unfortunately, this case study project, which was developed in 1950, included only white, male participants. This delimitation proved to be a serious disadvantage in preventing a deeper exploration of how culture, gender and race influence career construction. I regret the omission of female and minority participants from the study. Despite the serious structural flaw that limits the study's contribution, the authors still believe that much can be learned from this rare set of data about the lives of eight men. This is because their life portraits are unique in addressing the puzzle posed by Super. The portraits suggest that personality shapes career choices and vocational behaviours and that these actions in turn modify personality. The portraits also reveal how personality structures the private meaning of occupational interests and career patterns. More importantly, they show how personality manifests itself in work roles by means of a process that turns preoccupation into occupation, a process that enables individuals to actively master what they once passively suffered. Insight into this core process of career construction was made possible by using a prospective research structure to observe how specific individuals built their careers over their lifetimes.

Three Patterns of Career Construction

The case studies clearly showed three distinct patterns of career construction, each leading to a different type of career commitment. The first major career commitments are made during late adolescence, a period of "identity crisis", according to Erikson (1963). For most people, these initial commitments change over time, so career construction theory highlights not the content of these commitments but the processes that individuals use to form, maintain and revise their commitments. This case study project revealed three prototypical patterns of career commitment: commitment based on exploration, commitment based on the preferences of other people and a disinclination to make commitments. Berzonsky (1989), a developmental psychologist, explained that these commitment patterns result from three distinct behavioural styles by which people form, maintain and revise their psychosocial identities: the information-based style, the normative style and the avoidant style.

He described the three styles for processing identity choices and commitments as different ways of thinking about the self in relation to the social environment.

The first life portrait, that of Robert Coyne, illustrates the information-based style of making commitments, one that uses exploration and problem-focused coping strategies to integrate identifications with role models into a unified and cohesive identity and to then make suitable and viable choices that implement this identity in occupational roles. The information-based style usually produces adaptive coping strategies and results in a mastery of developmental tasks because it includes openness to change, exploration of alternatives, acceptance of feedback, introspection and a healthy separation from the family of origin. Individuals who adopt an information-based style tend to use a rational problem-solving strategy to seek information before making decisions relating to major life choices. When applied to vocational identity-formation and career construction, the information-based style typically includes planned attitudes toward the future, a broad exploration of options, a fund of knowledge regarding preferred alternatives and rational decision making. Once individuals using an information-based style select educational and vocational goals, they usually settle into a course of action, work persistently toward their goals and use problem-focused coping strategies to meet the challenges they encounter along the way.

The life portrait of Robert Coyne demonstrates an information-based style of making career commitments and finds its roots in family contentment and its consequences for a congruent career. His earliest recollection was building a snowman with his older brother and his second recollection was riding down the drive, falling on the cobblestones and picking himself up and doing it again. His role model was an uncle who had a goal. His hobbies were stamp collecting, playing cards and playing board games. His response to the projective technique was to become proficient at playing the violin and then to play it for retired people at a nursing home. At primary school he collected the milk money for the teacher. One noteworthy self-assessment is «I am a downfield planner.»

The second life portrait, that of Martin Saitzman, illustrates the normative style of making commitments, one that complies with the standards and expectations of significant others. This norm-adhering style springs from a preoccupation with pleasing parents and seeks to preserve an existing identity as part of the family. Individuals who use a normative style often settle into a course of action without investigating occupational alternatives that may displease significant others. Rather than explore the self and situations in the process of forming self-chosen commitments, they succumb to external pressures and protect the self from external threats by adhering to the family's occupational specifications. The identities that they form have coherence and continuity, but these features are produced by outside forces that shape and stabilize their commitments. In contrast to the information-based style, which often leads to self-initiation of an integrative vocational identity, the normative style often leads to identity foreclosure and pseudo-crystallization of occupational preferences. The normative style itself is not the problem; it can lead to an adaptive identity such as those displayed by individuals who have been described as guardians, (Josselson, 1996), society-minded (Kegan, 1994), and norm-favouring (Gough, 1990). Problems arise when the normative style is used to respond to powerful others who constrain the individual's occupational options. Family pressure to follow a preordained path may cause the individual to inhibit the use of decision-making skills and to forgo their own choice of behaviours, thereby delaying or impairing the individual's adaptive efforts. The distinguishing feature that makes a

normative style produce identity foreclosure therefore appears to be the quality of relationships with the family of origin. A normative style combined with healthy family relationships may reflect an interdependent pattern of career construction, one in which the collective good of the family becomes the criterion for individual choice. In contrast, the normative style combined with an inability to resolve relationship problems with parents typically leads to a dependent decision-making strategy, identity foreclosure and an unfulfilling career.

The life portrait of Martin Saltzman demonstrates the normative style of making career commitments and traces its roots to family coercion and its consequences for a conferred career. His earliest recollection was playing ball with his father and uncle in the backyard and them throwing him the ball. His favourite story was the Little Engine that Could. His role model was Tom Sawyer. His hobbies were making puppets, writing scripts and producing puppet shows. His response to the projective technique was to become proficient but to never enjoy playing it. One noteworthy self-assessment was «A father's need is a son's deed».

While the informational and normative styles both produce career commitment, the third style described by Berzonsky (1989) typically does not. The third life portrait, that of Glen Wallace, illustrates the avoidant style of identity processing, one that uses delay, procrastination and indecision in an effort to ignore problems and choices for as long as possible. Individuals who use the avoidant style prefer emotionally-focused coping and generally lack role models. They are reluctant to face conflict and make choices, instead they avoid the anxiety of choosing and committing for as long as possible. When the situation does not make the choice for them, they resort to emotionally-focused coping strategies. The avoidant style springs from negative perceptions of others and leads to a diffuse identity. Lacking coherence and continuity, individuals with diffused identities generally experience unstable and disjointed work histories.

The life portrait of Glen Wallace shows avoidance of career commitment and traces its roots to family conflict and its consequences for career confusion. His earliest recollection was a stranger climbing in through his bedroom window as he slept with his grandmother. He reported having no role model. His hobbies were playing with the guys: «the gang is the most important thing to me.» His response to the projective technique was to sneak away to play baseball with the gang. Two noteworthy-thy self-assessment were «I have a tendency in life to wait until someone suggests something» and «I just like to be with the gang.»

Conclusion
The three life portraits discussed in this paper differ in identity-formation style. Their differences in career construction have already begun to appear when the subjects arrived at high school, as they are reflected in their early recollections, role models, leisure activities and aspirations. The differences continue throughout their career patterns and interpersonal relationships. In sum, it appears that early personality dispositions play a more important role in career construction than career education and counselling theories have recognised thus far.