

Re-Viewing Scientific Models of Career as Social Constructions

My original proposed talk was entitled “Narratives, Narrativity, and Narrative Competence.”

If social constructionism is to contribute to career counseling, it must in some way be linked to current practice so that practitioners, who choose to, may gradually make a transition to the new model with its accompanying methods and materials.

When one theory succeeds another, the initial impression is that the new one contradicts the old and eliminates it, whereas subsequent research leads to retaining more of it than was foreseen. (Piaget in Bringuier, 1980, p. 144). The opposing hypothesis can later be seen not as contradictory, but as complimentary.

Personally, I believe that future research and reflection will lead to a postmodern career constructionism that retains more from modern models of vocational psychology than is currently foreseen.

Toward this end, I seek to contribute to a contemporary vision of careers by using social constructionism as a meta-theory with which to reconceptualize, and thereby retain, central concepts in contemporary theories of vocational choice and career development.

I attempt what Collin and Young (2003) have called a challenging possibility—and what some others declare an impossibility-- namely to incorporate ideas that were originally developed from a positivist epistemology into a constructionist perspective on careers. I approach this task by emphasizing the **interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals make sense of their vocational behavior as well as by reconceptualizing traditional concepts, including vocational interests, as processes that have possibilities rather than continuing to view them as realities that predict the future.**

To do this, I re-view realist categories as career constructions. In so doing, I am certain to alienate both constructionists and positivists who argue that their positions are theoretically incommensurate and, that in trying to credential both, I slight each one. Nevertheless, I have been intrigued by viewing conventions in vocational psychology's canon, including Strong's interests, Super's stages, and Holland's hexagon as social constructions rather than scientific discoveries.

Because of the compartmentalization of modern and postmodern paradigms, linkages between the two are difficult to form at the philosophical level. However, at functional and pragmatic levels, bridges are emerging, especially if one concentrates on the role of language in constructing social realities.

Words are resources or tools that people use to work out matters pertaining to our social relatedness. Language is a way of controlling the debate and establishing power. Definitions or dominant constructions sanction a certain representation of reality. These dominant constructions are sustained to the degree that they produce an image that society on the whole finds comfortable and reassuring. Words used to define a construct also confine that construct by establishing a boundary.

Vocational psychology is socially constituted to produce --in the form of scientific thought-- definitions that sanction a certain representation of reality, especially key aspects of vocational behavior such as interests, abilities, values, and developmental tasks.

As vocational psychologists, our shared language and definitions provide a cultural source of community. Within our community, social constructionists prefer a conversational epistemology that views meaning as created, retained, or modified during the course of our social interaction in our journals and at our meetings. At conferences such as this one, we socially negotiate meaning as a way of opening up new pathways through which to advance our discipline. So I want to negotiate with you the possibility of new meanings for traditional, core concepts.

I wish to share with you, or should I say negotiate with you, seven examples of modifying the meaning of core concepts so as to retain them for future use. In each instance, the concept being considered has been viewed by modernist as an entity that has been discovered and described in much the same way that an object in the natural or physical world would be discovered and described.

These concepts can be re-viewed from the fresh perspective of social constructionism. In attempting to do so, I search to find a way of embracing the critical insights of preeminent scholars who we all admire such as Strong, Super, Tyler, Holland, and Dawis. I believe that we cannot afford to lose the hundred years of progress we have made in vocational psychology and start fresh.

1. View Holland's RIASEC as a Vocabulary

Language is the initial choice. Similar to individual people, the profession of vocational psychology is defined by the words we choose. Language partly creates the character as well as setting and the movement of vocational psychology.

Today our dominant language is that of Holland's making. We all speak RIASEC and our favorite journal has a hexagon on the cover. Well, maybe not Mark Pope's favorite journal-- which my wife Mary Ann frequently tried to convince me should have a Super's rainbow on the cover.

Holland's theory serves clients by providing them with a concise vocabulary for describing both who they are and what they are looking for. It puts words on our perceptions of the social arrangement of work. This vocabulary allows clients to be more efficient and effective in thinking about themselves and the work world.

The RIASEC language enables career counselors to offer clients a vocabulary of self and the world. It gives a vocabulary for self-construction. It is a tool for construct elaboration.

Furthermore, the RIASEC vocabulary is an invaluable resource for articulating accounts of occupations and work life. This language prompts heuristic thinking about occupations.

In short, the RIASEC language provides a vocabulary for communicating ideas about self and work.

2. View Holland's Hexagon as a Map

In addition to a vocabulary, Holland's theorizing has produced a simplifying taxonomy which serves as a source of ideas (hypotheses and possibilities). The hexagonal compass provides a valuable framework for teaching clients how to organize and store information both about themselves and about the work world.

However, let us not be mistaken. The hexagon does not represent the structure of occupations or the world of work itself; it represents individual perceptions of that social arrangement.

The hexagon does not reflect reality, it reflects the fact that socially regulated similarities in environments produce personality patterns, maybe of six types, among individuals with heterogeneous potentials. As the French philosopher Bordeau states in explaining his construct of "habitus," we inhabit and are inhabited by our social world.

Holland's hexagon maps cognitions that individuals use to conceptualize occupations. Fred Borgen says "we are mapping the structure of how individuals think about occupations or work activities." Thus, we are mapping semantic space. Factor analyses provide us with **themes** of thinking, not **latent** or basic variables.

Because factor analyses map individual's cognitions, demographic variation in the groups to which individuals are socially assigned affects the shape of the map. This is why the hexagon becomes a misshapen polyglot when representing the cognitions of individuals from diverse ethnic and racial groups and the cognitions of women when compared to men.

This conceptualization of the hexagon does not question its usefulness.

Even if the hexagon was never used for personality assessment, it would remain a major contribution to vocational psychology because of its utility in teaching individuals how society organizes itself into macro-environments such as occupations, college majors, and leisure activities. Counselors can use Holland's hexagon as a road map to show students and clients where occupational pathways intersect as well as a travelogue that describes the types of people and situations one can meet on the different paths.

3. View Interest Inventories as Measures of Resemblance

Career construction theory explicitly asserts that interest inventories do not measure “real” phenomenon that exist within an individual. They measure *resemblances* to socially constructed clusters of individuals; they have no reality or truth value outside themselves

Understanding things by metaphors and resemblance means understanding one thing in terms of another. This “another” in the case of Strong and Holland is socially-constituted and designed groups. Remember Strong selected the individuals who would constitute the occupational criterion groups and Holland formulated the RIASEC prototypes. Ideal types are chosen and created, not discovered.

Strong’s inventory measures resemblance to groups of people. The occupational scales do not really measuring occupational interests. That is why Borgen and Harmon, when they were David Campbell’s graduate assistants, constructed the basic interest scales to try to identify the interests of inventory takers and to characterize the interests of individuals who constitute the occupational criterion groups.

It was not only Strong's occupational scales that measures resemblance, Holland's SDS does as well. Holland has frequently reminded people that scores on the VPI and SDS indicate degree of resemblance to each of six prototypes.

In determining an individual's degree of *resemblance* to each of the RIASEC types, a counselor can succinctly characterize how an individual construes and interprets the world. Counselors must not interpret the scores on Strong's occupational scales and Holland's SDS as portals on a client's "real" interests. Instead they should use these scores to generate hypotheses which are viewed as possibilities not predictions.

4. View Interest as a Relationship

Now let us turn to interests per se. Interests are not psychological traits, they are psychosocial tensional states. Interests denote the relationship between an individual and the environment.

From Latin recall the meaning of INTER EST. To be between.

From this perspective, interests are viewed as dynamic processes not stable traits. If anything, they are a readiness to see that is strongly primed; a high vigilance for opportunities and a quickness to respond.

Interests are personal expressions resulting from transactions between inner mechanisms and outer opportunities. They lie at the interface of the intrapsychic and the interpersonal. Interest is an emergent quality that is narrated by language, historically situated, socially constituted, and culturally shaped.

Therefore, counselors should not privilege interests above other constructs as predictors of occupational congruence and career success. The idea of shared interest is just one among many important indicators to consider when individuals choose occupations and build their careers.

Also, counselors may want to heed Kitson's advice that they should not try to diagnosis interests but rather help individuals create interests by discussing with them how they might use work to become more whole.

5. View Career Stages as a Story

Super's theory of stages is a linguistic schema for organizing and interpreting data about work lives. The stages represent heuristic ideas and organizing principles, not predictions. Stages set conditions about what to look for during a work life and stages place events into an understandable framework.

If this sounds like chapters in a book, it should. Super's stages are chapters in autobiographies as defined by Charlotte Buehler in her pioneering study of older individuals. The chapters were placed on life stories after she read 60 of them collected from elders in the community by her graduate students. So, they originated as a literary device.

The career stages supply workers with meanings they can use to interpret their work lives. Thus, stages make an individual's story of personal experience and private meaning comprehensible to both self and others by embedding it in and systematically organizing it according to a dominant social structure.

In addition to providing a commonsense framework, the grand story of career synchronizes individuals to their culture by telling them in advance how their work lives should proceed and prompting them to do what society expects. These promptings are called vocational development tasks, and as David Jepsen once explained they are nothing more than social expectations.

6. View Occupations as a Social Activity

With the dejobbing of the work world, we might want to deconstruct the meaning of occupations. Occupation is a social strategy by which to sustain oneself.

An occupation is a means of social integration. Occupations provide socially organized pathways for contributing to society and making a living.

Occupational fields are constructs that society uses to structure and classify work activities. However, individual workers do not have occupations; they occupy positions and perform tasks which may not be easily or meaningfully classifiable into stable occupations. The newly emerging social arrangement of work roles is making the idea of occupation less meaningful and prompting some of our colleagues to prefer the term work activities. The reorganization of work is also challenging the fundamental meaning of job and career.

7. View Career as a Carrier of Meaning

Career has the modernist meaning of series of positions that an individual occupies from school years through retirement. This meaning follows from the interpretation of the French word *carriere* to mean path. It is one's path through life marked by milestones of positions held.

Carriere however, had a more fundamental meaning. Career means carrier or vehicle. Words that come from *carriere* are car and chariot and *careen*. We use a career or vehicle to transverse our life course (*curriculum vita*). From social construction perspective, career could mean, if we all agree, the vehicle that holds and carries meaning. As David Tiedeman once stated, **“career is the imposition of meaning on vocational behavior.”**

In conclusion, as Walter Mischel wrote in describing alternative futures for the science of psychology, we have the toothbrush problem. We vocational psychologists treat our theories like toothbrushes. No self-respecting person wants to use anyone else's.

However, our ranks as vocational psychologists are now too thin to continue to engage in an epistemic war between **positivism and constructionism**. So let us avoid the **modern split of either or thinking** and use the **postmodern splice of both and thinking**.

A theory unites the meaning of concepts. Let us all try to move to a theory that unites us and strengthens our community so that we can make an even greater contribution to our society.

Bringuier, J. C. (1980). *Conversations with Jean Piaget*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.