

Reinvigorating the Study of Careers

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Abstract

Before discussing how to innovate the study of career development using insights from life-span psychology and life-course sociology, researchers might benefit from reconsidering whether they are studying careers or studying vocational behavior. While the word “career” seems ubiquitous in vocational psychology research, there are important differences between the study of vocational behavior, occupational roles, and career development. In this article, I urge researchers to (a) reconsider the meaning of career and research on career development, (b) adopt prospective, longitudinal research designs, and (c) concentrate first on processes of development and then on the content of careers. Considering these suggestions may ready vocational psychology for true innovations such as studying human development through work and relationships.

Reinvigorating the Study of Careers

It is worthwhile to consider how to use innovations in life-course sociology and life-span psychology to update the developmental paradigm in career psychology so as to more adequately account for the vocational behavior of diverse individuals in manifold contexts. I have three proposals in this regard. Unfortunately, my proposals do not deal with innovation, they deal with resuscitation. Simply stated, I believe that we must revive studies of career development because they are very rare. My three proposals for reinvigorating the study of careers draw attention to issues we have come to ignore.

The Career Domain

My first proposal is that we bring career studies back to life by reminding ourselves what constitutes the career domain. The goal of innovating career development research rests on the assumption that career psychologists actually use the developmental paradigm. Given the sparsity of longitudinal studies and the continued focus on studying individual differences, this assumption can be challenged. Much of what passes for "career development" research actually uses the phrase "career development" when "vocational behavior" would be more accurate. To make my point to myself, I read an article to see how the word career was used. To find an article, I selected randomly a recent issue of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* and looked in the table of contents for any article with the word career in the title. The one that I found included the words "Career Choice" in the title and the introduction referred to "career behavior" and "barriers to career development, or career barriers." Sure enough, the article continually used the phrase "career development, " but the article itself did not deal with this topic. I believe that the article dealt with educational and vocational choices not career choices;

vocational behavior not career behavior, and barriers to occupational choice not career barriers. Not to single out this article, I could cite as an example of inaccurate labeling the change in title of the *Vocational Guidance Quarterly* to the *Career Development Quarterly*. For instance, consider its section dealing with occupational information which is now mislabeled as "Career Literature." So what is the domain of career development, how does it fit in the field of vocational psychology, and why the confusion?

Vocational psychology is the study of vocational behavior and development Vocational refers to the responses an individual makes in choosing and adapting to an occupation. Crites (1969), distinguished vocational behavior from other types of behavior in requiring that the stimulus be occupational, not physical or social. He enjoined researchers to systematically use occupational to designate only stimulus variables and vocational to denote only response variables as for example in occupational information and vocational choice Vocational psychology's basic unit of study is vocational behavior. Vocational development is a construct inferred from the systematic changes that can be observed in vocational behavior over time. Not all vocational behavior develops as individuals grow older.

What then is career? Fundamentally career refers to vocational development. I like how the OED defines career- " A person's course or progress through life." Life course is the meaning that sociologists inscribe on career when they define it as sequence of occupations in the life of an individual. This sequence can be objectively observed as well as analyzed for patterns. Studies that analyzed occupational sequences and concatenations in careers originated with Davidson and Anderson's (1937) research on occupational mobility. A few years later, the sociologists Form and Miller (1949) coined the term "occupational career pattern" to denote the sequence and duration of work positions occupied by an individual. The most widely quoted

definition of an occupational career was offered by Shartle (1959): "career is the series of preparatory, participatory, and retirement positions an individual occupies through his/her life cycle." In

1993, the OED added a definition of career pattern but called it career structure - "a recognized pattern of career development and advancement within a job or profession."

Focusing on the developmental tasks that shape a career pattern, instead of the occupational content of a career pattern, led psychologists such as Super (1957) to use the term "life stage" rather than career pattern. But we should not forget, when comparing life-course and life-span perspectives on vocational behavior, that the sociological concept of career patterns closely resembles the psychological concept of life stages.

Of course there had been earlier studies of careers than the career pattern study of Davidson and Anderson (1937). These studies involved life histories and were originally called "own story" research and then sociological life-history records. According to Howard Becker (1966), the earliest life-history was published by Thomas and Znaniecki (1927) in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. During the 1930s, the University of Chicago Sociology Department enthusiastically promoted life-history research, led by Clifford Shaw who wrote *The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story* (Shaw, 1930) and *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career* (Shaw, 1931). Shaw's idea was to draw an intimate portrait of the sequence of events in the course of a person's life and illuminate how this sequence expresses a trend of behavior (for Shaw this would be delinquent behavior while for us it would be vocational behavior). Shaw believed that each life-history could generate hypotheses for further study and, when a sufficient number of life histories had been accumulated, permit comparative analysis. Shaw's use of the term career explicitly focused on the subject's point of view, particularly how

individuals conceive their social roles and interpret their experiences. This subjective perspective on private meaning stands in contrast to the public pattern of occupations. It coincides with Hughes' (1958) definition of subjective career as a "moving perspective" in which people see their lives as a whole and from which they interpret meaning of their attributes, actions, and experiences. It is this subjective meaning of career, the one which individuals use to orient themselves to their society's occupational structure, that Super (1954) assessed with his "thematic-extrapolation technique" for identifying the psychological themes that shape a career and the meaning that Miller-Tiedeman and Tiedeman (1985) denoted in their definition of career as the "imposition of meaning on vocational behavior."

The essential point here is that career denotes a reflection on the course of one's vocational behavior, it is not vocational behavior. Occupation and vocational behavior both refer to interaction with the environment, whereas career refers to reflection about the course of this interaction. This reflection can focus on actual events such as one's occupations (objective career) or on biographical themes (subjective career) that explain one's occupations.

All this to say that career studies, or studies of vocational development, differ substantially from studies of *differences between individuals* in that *they examine differences within an individual* at two or more points in time. Career studies require at least a pair of non-simultaneous observations so that the development of a pattern and/or theme can be revealed. When using biographies such as Shaw did, this longitudinal method may be retrospective, but of course prospective studies are preferred. Parenthetically, I wonder if the phrase "career development" is redundant [of course "vocational development" is not redundant]. Does not career imply development? We might be better served by using career with an adjective such as "vocational" or "occupational" that distinguishes it from careers an individual may enact in other

theaters of life such as a marital [or partnership] career, a parental career, or a leisure career.

Longitudinal Designs Reveal Career Development

My second proposal is to reward and reinforce the use of prospective, longitudinal designs. Prospective longitudinal designs, concerning both career patterns and themes, are rare in our field. Cross-sectional designs are fine for studying vocational behavior and occupations but we need longitudinal designs to study careers. We must stop mistaking for career research studies that use cross-sectional designs to investigate vocational maturity and vocational identity at one point-in-time. These studies focus on “degree of development” rather than on development itself. I would be hard pressed to identify more than one or two studies that administered the *Career Maturity Inventory*, the *Career Development Inventory*, or the *Vocational Identity Scale* two or more times and examined trends in development along with the causes and correlates of these trends.

Thus, I propose, that to resuscitate the psychology of careers, we encourage researchers to use longitudinal designs to investigate how individuals produce their own development and, in particular, how people fit work into their lives rather than how to fit people into occupations. This will require grant proposals written by research teams, hopefully drawn from the Society for Vocational Society as recommended by Fred Vondracek. Researchers working alone find longitudinal research to be a daunting task, and without public data sets such as those common in sociology, graduate students do not have time to conduct longitudinal research in producing their theses and dissertations.

Developmental Sciences Inform Career Research

My third proposal for revitalizing career psychology is to focus on development first and careers second. Counseling psychologists are fond of explaining that they are psychologists first

and then become counseling specialists. The same should hold true for career development researchers and practitioners. They must be developmentalists first, then they can become career specialists. This reframing of career development research makes it as much a specialty in developmental psychology as in counseling psychology. This proposal recognizes the contributions of life-span psychology in showing the importance for development of context and relationships. We can revive career psychology by shifting attention, as urged by Mary Sue Richardson (1999), from promoting career development to fostering individual development through work and relationships. Using developmental models and methods will allow the psychology of careers to closely examine *how individuals fit work into their lives*-- a worthy complement to the psychology of occupations that examines *how individuals fit into occupations*.

The psychology of careers must focus on development; moreover, it should now concentrate on the actual processes of development and specific mechanisms of change rather than continue to study only the attitudes, beliefs, and competencies that condition the process of vocational development. For example, Baltes and Baltes' (1990) life-span model of developmental processes involving selection, optimization, and compensation would be an innovative way to approach the study of the processes that actually develop careers.

In sum, I have proposed that to resuscitate, not innovate, research on the psychology of careers we need to apply developmental models and methods in prospective, longitudinal research designs that examine the life course of vocational behavior from both the objective perspective of public pattern and the subjective perspective of private meaning. Then, we will be poised for true innovations such as studying human development through work and relationships.

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