The Social Construction of Vocational Interests

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I thank Richard Young and Audrey Collin for organizing this symposium and encouraging me to think about vocational interests from the perspective of social constructionism. In the past, I have examined vocational interests from the vantage point offered by logical positivism and by psychological constructivism. I believe that now thinking about vocational interests from a social constructionist perspective may (a) increase the conceptual breadth with which we construe interests, (b) innovate research on interests by working at the boundaries of current understandings, and (c) engage in joint dialogue representatives of three discourse communities (i.e., positivist, constructivist, and constructionist) who each think about interests in a different way.

I believe that logical positivism, psychological constructivism, and social constructionism each offer epistemic positions that are useful in studying vocational behavior and in providing career counseling to clients. I realize that each epistemology contests the other two; with each questioning the validity and challenging the claims of the other two positions. Despite such epistemic wars, I realize that no discourse ever goes away and that each perspective provides a different way of approaching scientific concepts such as vocational interests. As a pragmatist, I accept the claims of all three as different ways of making meaning. Taking multiple perspectives leads to multiple truths, with each truth demonstrating its validity and credibility by being useful in helping practitioners comprehend clients' interests and in guiding researchers as they investigate the scientific concept of vocational interests. By looking at a single topic from all three vantage points, we may cultivate deeper meaning in understanding vocational interests and broader methods for measuring them. In so doing, we also step outside the epistemology that embeds us

in a cultural tradition and discourse community which both shapes our suppositions about the origins of vocational interests and determines how we conduct research on their action.

The symposium organizers requested that each symposiast begin their presentation by stating their definitions of psychological constructivism and social constructionism. I endorse the definitions advanced by Young and Collin. They view personal constructivism as internal processes for cognitively or mentally constructing the world of experience and they view social constructionism as construction of meaning between person and culture or society, emphasizing language. Personally, I view psychological constructivism (person as scientist) and social constructionism (person as storyteller) as opposite sides of the same coin. Constructivism is about personal knowing and constructionism is about social relationships. Constructivists start with a person's preoccupations to understand her or his interests whereas constructionists start with a person's relationship to understand her or his interests. I believe that narrative (especially about relationships) links constructivism and constructionism, agreeing with Neimeyer that the narrative model of human sciences is a multidisciplinary paradigm for theory integration.

In this presentation, I attempt to formulate a way of thinking about vocational interests from the perspective of social constructionism. In so doing, I recognize that interests are more than a creative expression of the individual, they are actually the embodiment of cultural processes. This, of course, is a view that differs from those proposed by logical positivists who concentrate on individual differences and person-environment fit.

Positivism was dominant when vocational psychology emerged as a specialty within applied psychology. Relying on the scientific method, positivist invented and developed the construct of "personality" to replace the construct of "character" and the construct of "a job" to replace the construct of "chores" (i.e., the daily routine of tasks on a farm). Before the invention

of personality and job, psychologists did not focus on individual differences or job requirements. After the invention of these 20th century constructs, applied psychologists concentrated mightily on assessing individual differences in ability and interests and matching them to occupational requirements and rewards. Person-environment fit became a mantra (i.e., "a sacred verbal formula") and the core of vocational psychology's cultural tradition. E. K. Strong's early empirical approach to interests shaped the prevailing view of interests during the 20th century. As recently as 1994, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (p. 88) defined "vocational interests as patterns of likes, dislikes, and indifferences regarding career-relevant activities and occupations." Fred Borgen (in press) recently commented on what he referred to as this "resolute empiricism."

> *In one sense, interest measurement has been a victim of its own success. Strong's empirical occupational scales garnered much respect and utility so their conceptual limitations were forgiven. Conceptual definition of interests did not frame Strong's occupational scales. The scales were more in the tradition of dustbowl empiricism, with an occupational scale defined by the items that empirically differentiated the people in that occupation. Consequently, we do not have a well developed theory of vocational interests that explains their meaning as constructs and their origins and action.*

Consistent with the perspective of positivism, many other psychologists view interest as personality traits. For example, Todt (1978)-- the leading European theorist of vocational interests-- defined vocational interests as general and stable dispositional tendencies directed at relatively broad classes of activities. Holland also considers interests as rooted in stable personal traits that he catalogued in his taxonomy of six (RIASEC) vocational personality types. When we step inside the tradition started by Strong and sustained by Holland, it leads us to hold certain

assumptions. Stepping out of the person-environment tradition opens new vistas.

In addition to taking a positivist perspective that views interests as traits or individual difference variables, we can move to a different standpoint and refocus on vocational interests from the perspective of social constructionism. This 21st century vantage point allows us to view interests as reflections of social participation. A metaphor might help us envision a new image of vocational interests as we unpack and explore a social constructionist view of interests. In addition to thinking about interests using a motivational metaphor (e.g., they guide movement), we can also think about them using a relational metaphor. For example, we can consider vocational interests using the metaphor of a dancing, instead of the metaphor of gyroscope. As a relational construction, interests center around we, not me. As we relate, so we are interested. In relationship, we create interests. Vocational interests rely on what we can do together and enable us to find ourselves by entering a community. They answer, for each individual, Wittgenstein's central question of "How can we go one together?" Because interests are generated within relationships, they are a social artifact. They represent coordinated action (or joint actions). Rather than studying interests to predict and control behavior, we can study them to coordinate action, or to dance together.

Interests are typically expressed in socially recognized terms because they arise from social experience as an individual draws on what is culturally available to enact her or his strivings and receive comfort from the community. Vocational interests emerge in a social context. They are constructed from the cultural repertoire of stories and of scenarios about what is possible, appropriate, and valuable in the work world. They encourage social connection, not individualistic isolation, as they seek to balance "I and us" by gratifying complementary needs through coordinated patterns of activity. Thus, interests represent possibilities of participation in

communal existence and a means of achieving interpersonal security in that community. Interests both sustain patterns of relationship and reflect the community in the individual.

Interests implement or express a self; they do not constitute a self. Interests are integrative tendencies that characterize one's interpersonal relations and imply circumstances necessary for their discharge and satisfaction. They indicate adaptive potentialities and their self-recognition and articulation increases an individual's potential to adapt to the environment by helping one interact with the community in competent and effective ways. They facilitate long-term and persistent engagement with a particular social environment. Similar to identity, interests are about self-in-role; in fact, the accumulation of interests may be an operational definition of identity formation.

Conclusions

At this point in time, I have concluded that the perspective of social constructionism may help us formulate better theories of interests, especially as they pertain to the origin of interests. While a separate view, the constructionist view of interests is compatible with the positivist view on how to measure vocational interests. From the constructionist perspective, we can state that interests assimilate interpersonal processes into self, and it is these interests that are measured by the elegant interest inventories constructed within the tradition of logical positivism. So, for me, the perspective of social constructionism helps us think about the origins of interests, while the perspective of logical positivism helps us think about how to measure interests. This distinction between forming and measuring interests helps me to understand a long-standing disagreement in the history of career counseling. While the differential psychologists of the Midwest constructed and developed interest inventories, the developmental psychologists of the East criticized their use. The Eastern school asserted that it was mistake to try "to discover ready-made interests by

giving interest tests" (Kitson, 1942, p. 567). They disparaged interest inventory interpretation as the counselor acting as a fortune-teller who predicts which occupation an individual will enter. Instead, they proclaimed that a career counselor's duty is to help individuals *become interested.* They maintained that promoting exploratory behavior and reflecting upon its outcome was the way to create interests, and the essential work of the career counselor. The few psychologist who argued that counselors should help clients create interests, not diagnose interests, were understandably viewed as "anti-testing." However, I believe that the postmodern turn has made their proclamation more understandable and reasonable. We can accept both views by concluding that the perspective of social constructionism lets us view the origins of interests, while the perspective of logical positivism lets us see how to measure interests.

From my view, social constructionism helps the counselor understand how to create interests and speak them into being whereas logical positivism helps the counselor measure long-standing interests and increase clients' self-knowledge about their interests. When an interest inventory is flat or an individual has not yet developed vocational interests, it is necessary to promote exploratory behavior. Social experience provides the means and meaning through which one forms interests. In reflecting on the outcomes of exploratory behaviors, career counselors may help clients elaborate their experiences and symbolize them linguistically as they speak them into being. This meaning-making activity helps a client substantiate the self and its subjectivity in a social context. From this constructionist perspective, the counselor's rhetorical work of constructing interests serves the client as an integrative process of social synthesis and compromise. Once interests are linguistically formulated, they set limits on what an individual looks for in the world. Interests determine what he or she attends to and even what she or he can do. It is then time to translate them into occupational titles.

I believe that Holland's work serves both the constructionist task of creating interests and the positivist task of measuring them. Holland's theory provides the textual tradition for the language of vocational interests. His hexagon is a tool of intelligibility for both the creation and the assessment of interests. It is a way of organizing the relation between person and world. Holland's simplifying taxonomy provides a vocabulary of the self and the work world. In addition to providing a vocabulary to linguistically form interests and talk about them, it also is a source of hypotheses and ideas about how to translate interests into action (Gottfredson, 2003).

In sum, we should continue to both objectify interests by measuring them with inventories and treat them as culturally constituted proposals about an individual's possible contributions to the community. This returns us to Strong's venerable inventory. It remains remarkable that Strong chose, and Holland continues, to measure "resemblance" to socially constituted groups, because in the end, that is what interests really are. They are a social affinity, that is, an attraction or feeling of kinship. They involve a relationship by choice, one that reflects a similarity between persons and announce what we can do together to make the future.

I wish to end by acknowledging that from a social constructionist perceptive, this paper has failed because it has not reconstructed the positivist's view of interests and its dominant cultural discourse within vocational psychology nor has the paper provided a counterplot or alternative narrative that subverts the positivist narrative. Rather, I have tried to add an additional perspective on vocational interests, one that, at least for me, deepens the meaning of the scientific concept of vocational interests, and returns us to the root meaning of the word "interest," which in Latin means (*inter esse*) "to be between."

References

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