

Three Life Portraits: A Longitudinal Study of Personality and Career

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Why 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 that book, he used conclusions from an extensive literature review to formulate tentative answers to these questions. Then, he synthesized these conclusions into a theory of careers, one with practical implications for fostering human development through 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 a program of research known as the Career Pattern Study (Super, 1985). This study examined the puzzling questions about career construction by using a prospective, longitudinal, case-study design to examine the interaction between personality and work over a period of 50 years. Unfortunately, this case study project, which was designed 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. The authors of this book regret the omission of female and minority participants from the study. Despite the serious design flaw that delimits the contribution of the study, the

authors still believe that much can be learned from this rare data set 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 behaviors and, in turn, these actions 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 through a process of turning preoccupation to 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 design to watch how specific individuals built their careers over their lifetimes.

### Three Portraits of Career Construction

The case studies clearly showed three distinct patterns of career construction, each leading to a 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 preferences of other people, and a disinclination to make commitments. Berzonsky (1989), a developmental psychologist, explained that these commitment patterns result from three distinct behavioral styles by which people form, maintain, and revise their psychosocial identities: the informational style, normative style, and 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 *informational* style of making commitments, one that uses exploration and problem-focused coping to integrate identifications with role models into an unified and cohesive identity and then make suitable and viable choices that implement that identity in occupational roles. The informational style usually produces adaptive coping and 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 the informational style tend to use a rational problem-solving strategy to seek information before deciding about important life choices. When applied to vocational identity-formation and career construction, the informational style typically includes planful attitudes toward the future, broad exploration of options, a fund of knowledge about preferred alternatives, and rational decision making. Once individuals with an informational style select educational and vocational goals, they usually settle into a course of action, work persistently toward their goals, and use problem-focused coping to meet the challenges they encounter along the way. The life portrait of Robert Coyne shows the informational style of making career commitments and traces its antecedents in family contentment and its consequences in a congruent career.

The second life portrait, that of Martin Saltzman, illustrates the *normative* style of making commitments, one that conforms to the prescriptions and expectations of significant others. This norm-adhering style springs from a preoccupation with pleasing parents and seeks to preserve an existing identification 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 situation 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 informational style, which often leads to the self-authoring 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-favoring (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 decisional competencies and forgo performance of choice behaviors, thereby delaying or impairing the individual's adaptive efforts. Thus, the distinguishing feature that makes a normative style produce identity foreclosure appears to be the quality of relationships with the family of origin. A normative style combined with healthy family relations 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 shows the normative style of making career commitments and traces its antecedents in family coercion and its consequences in a conferred career.

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, for as long as possible, problems and choices. 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 antecedents in family conflict and its consequences in career confusion.

### Conclusion

The three life portraits discussed in this paper differ in identity-formation style. Their differences in career construction begin to show already in high school, as they are reflected in their early recollections, role models, leisure activities, and life course. 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 theories of career education and counseling have heretofore acknowledged.