Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Careers:

Dispositions, Concerns, and Narratives

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One of Samuel H. Osipow's major contributions to the fields of vocational psychology and career counseling continues to be his efforts to describe, evaluate, and compare theories of career choice, development, and adjustment. Osipow's interest in this topic spans his career in counseling psychology. He began his reading and reflection on career theory when, as a graduate student at Syracuse University in the late 1950s, he wrote a term paper on the topic. After completing his doctoral studies, Osipow worked in the Counseling Center at Pennsylvania State University (1961-1967) which was directed by Donald Ford who had written a book on theories of counseling and psychotherapy (Ford & Urban, 1963). Osipow's relationship with Ford, along with the intellectual climate at Penn State, nurtured Osipow's ambition to expand his term paper into a textbook that organized and explained the theories of career development. That book, *Theories of Career Development*, first published in 1968, is now in its fourth edition (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). Osipow's (1968) book along with Crites (1969) book on *Vocational Psychology* combined to help crystallize vocational psychology as basic science discipline, distinct from the applied psychology of career counseling. Furthermore, *Theories of Career Development* became the standard textbook for generations of graduate students enrolled in career counseling courses.

In the preface to the first edition, Osipow (1968) explained that he wrote *Theories of Career Development* to examine and evaluate current theories and pertinent empirical findings as well as to compare similarities and differences in the theories. "A further purpose of this book is to attempt to synthesize some general theoretical statements which might integrate the more

useful and effective constructs of the various theoretical positions, as well as to identify the ingredients common to most of the theories" (p. viii). Osipow's enduring interest in identifying and synthesizing common elements in career theories, in due course, resulted in a landmark article written to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the journal he founded. In this article, entitled "Convergence in theories of career choice and development: Review and prospect," Osipow (1990) examined the convergence in four major career theories that had remained central in vocational psychology and career counseling for at least the life of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*: trait- and-factor (Holland, 1997), social learning (Krumboltz, 1994), developmental (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996), and work adjustment (Dawis, 1996). Osipow explained that these four theories now resemble each other in important ways, prompting him to examine the possibility of theory unification. This seminal article induced vocational psychologists to consider the possibility of theory integration (e.g., Borgen, 1991; Super, 1992; Hackett, Lent, & Greenhaus, 1991), which in due course led to a national conference and subsequent book on *Convergence in Career Development Theories* (Savickas & Lent, 1994).

Last year, at an APA symposium on theories of career maturity I proposed a list of desiratum for new frameworks that integrate career theories (see the Appendix). Such a framework does not currently exist, yet advances in personality, developmental, and motivational psychology suggest several alternative outlines for an initial framework. One such outline could be articulated by adapting a conceptual framework such as the one proposed by McAdams (1995) to describe personality theories. This paper presents an initial effort to transpose McAdam's tripartite model of personality theories to the vocational realm.

Levels of Personality and Career Theory

McAdams (1995) conceptualized three levels of personality theories to link the theories, rather than continue epistemic wars about which theory is best and force scholars to join distinct discourse communities. McAdams (1995) advanced the idea that "personality descriptors encompass at least three independent levels: (a) dispositional traits, such as the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1990); contextualized concerns, such as developmental tasks and personal strivings (Cantor & Zirkel, 1990); and integrative narratives of the self." McAdams asserts that a full description of personality requires all three levels: dispositional traits, personal concerns, and life stories. Each level of personality description has a particular range of convenience, with its own models, methods, and materials. Theory and research pertinent to each of these three levels "requires its own indigenous nomenclatures, taxonomies, theories, frameworks, and laws" (McAdams, 1995, p. 365). Thus, a theory channels the data that is chosen for observation and the categories used to organize this data.

I believe that vocational psychologists interested in the unification of career theories, and the eventual construction of a comprehensive theory, can benefit from transporting McAdam's (1995) analysis of personality theories to the realm of vocational psychology. A full description of vocational behavior and career development, similar to a full description of personality, may also require three, and more likely four, distinct levels of analysis. The remainder of this paper elaborates this new framework for integrating career theories.

Level I: Vocational Personality Types

The career theory that parallels McAdam's level I dispositions, with an emphasis on the Big Five, appears to be Holland's (1997) typology of vocational personalities. Vocational

personality types and Big Five dimensions both differ from traits in that they are dispositions. Traits attribute recurring uniformities in a person's social behavior to personality structure. Behavioral continuity reflects personality traits. A collection of traits into syndromes and dispositions constitute a type. Holland's conceptual framework provides a broad band tool for organizing phenomena into type categories. Types represent abstract syndromes that emerge from concrete trait patterns. In fact, types are at a rather high level of abstraction despite being composed of a broad variety of concrete experiences. Types show a dispositional signature and include skills, interests, and abilities for dealing with life roles. Types can be thought of as blueprints, tools, guidelines, or preferences for adaptation to life tasks. As an abstraction of the thematic properties that form a generic, loose adaptive strategy, types constitute the content of personality. Furthermore, dispositional types have an organizing influence that affects how individuals construe reality and their core roles. Thus, dispositions represent a self-organization of core structure that influences construing and interpreting the world. Holland's (1997) RIASEC model of personality types offers a practical structure for identifying the personological and vocational results of an individual's efforts at self-organization.

Similar to the personality dispositions in McAdams level I, the six RIASEC personality types are decontextualized and relatively nonconditional constructs that describe syndromes of traits. The trait syndromes or vocational personality types provide extremely useful comparative dimensions for conducting a vocational appraisal of individuals because RIASEC dimensions have proven social and career significance. Furthermore, the types demonstrate cross-situational consistency and longitudinal stability. They are relatively nonconditional, meaning that they are recurrent thema across diverse situations under different conditions and in manifold contexts.

Their longitudinal stability may eventually prove to involve a genetic component. For example, recent research suggests that genetic factors may explain as much as 40 or 50% of the variance in vocational interests. There also seems to be strong cross-cultural evidence regarding the usefulness of the RIASEC model. In short, similar to personality traits (McAdams, 1995, p. 375), Holland's RIASEC types appear to have two valuable features: comparative dimensions and nonconditionality.

Level II: Career Concerns

Level I descriptors of personality and career concentrate on self-organization and may be viewed as psychological variables. In contrast, level II descriptors emphasize self-extension into the social environment and may be viewed as psychosocial variables. The psychosocial descriptors are at level II because intrapersonal self-organization precedes interpersonal self-extension. Level II psychosocial variables describe how individuals reach out to integrate with society and regulate their own behavior relative to normative expectations. Level II descriptors provide an orientation to the particular historical time, culture context, life stage, and social role which locates an individual.

McAdams denotes level II variables as personal concerns. In contrast to Level I dispositions, level II personal concerns are contingent on contextual factors such as time, place, and role. These noncomparative and highly conditional personal concerns "speak to what people want, often during particular periods in their lives or within particular domains of action, and what life methods people use (strategies, plans, defenses, and so on) in order to get what they want or avoid getting what they don't want over time, in particulars places, and/or with respect to particular roles" (McAdams, 1995, 376). McAdams operationally defined personal concerns

borrowing a sentence from Cantor, Acker, and Cook-Flanagan (1992, p. 644): "those tasks that individuals see as personally important and time consuming at particular times in their lives."

In addition to being contingent on life stage and historical era, personal concerns also depend on situational conditions. Conditional patterns (Thorne, 1989) influence behavior in a particular situation. Whereas vocational personality types refer to what people typically have, career concerns refer to what individuals do in a particular time and place. McAdams points out that level II descriptors account for behavior that "is by and large local rather than general, subject to norms and expectations of a given social place or space" (p. 377). These actions are age-appropriate life-adaptations whereas personality dispositions constitute a central structure of the self.

In the vocational realm, personal concern variables have been termed career concerns. These level II descriptors of vocational behavior and career development concentrate on issues of social integration and self-regulation. Career concerns involve the situated use of strategies for effective performance of a specific role in a particular place at a certain time. An individual's career concerns include contextualized strategies, motivational systems, and domain-specific skills for dealing with age-appropriate developmental tasks and social expectations and for pursuing personal projects.

Career concerns have typically been studied by adherents to the developmental perspective on vocational behavior. They have attempted to chart the natural course of career concerns from grade school through retirement. In so doing, they have divided careers into ontogenetic stages and thematic issues denoted by periods of concern about vocational growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline. Each of these five periods has been characterized by

prototypical developmental tasks; pertinent attitudes, beliefs, and competencies; and relevant coping behaviors. For example, the construct of career maturity has been used to describe the exploration stage during which adolescents make educational and vocational choices. Researchers have characterized this process with developmental tasks of crystallizing and specifying; attitudes toward planning and exploring; beliefs about the work world and succeeding in it; competencies for decision making and problem solving; and coping behaviors.

The temporal context assumed by a life-span view distinguishes the developmental psychosocial perspective on vocational behavior from the differential psychological perspective which emphasizes individual differences in traits and types. Whereas RIASEC types are individual differences used to compare people, career concerns are psychosocial considerations used to compare an individual to himself or herself across developmental eras.

In addition to addressing the temporal context of career concerns, life-span, life-space theory also addresses the situational context. Accordingly, it explicitly meets McAdam's (1995) suggestion of "seeking information on the most salient settings and environment that make up the ecology of the person's life" (p. 378). Life-span, life-space theory uses the construct of role salience to evaluate an individual's participation in, commitment to, and value expectations for five central life roles: student, worker, citizen, family member, and leisurite. Each role calls for different motivational strivings (i.e., values and goals) and requires different competencies and skills. How these interrelate, and which roles are most salient, strongly shapes career development.

The descriptors used in the life-span, life-space approach to locating career concerns in time and place all focus on self-regulation strategies and goal implementation during a particular

ontogenetic period and in a specific social ecology. Thus, career concerns display themes and patterns of social meaning making that arise from joint social activity occurring in a certain cultural context, during a specific life stage, and in a distinct historical era. In short, career concerns (level II) are highly contingent on the psychosocial context. In contrast, vocational personality types (level II) seem to possess near-universal applicability, generalizing across numerous contexts. This difference may explain why Holland's (1997) RIASEC model and measures such as the *Vocational Personality Inventory* and the *Self-Directed Search* have been shown to be more transportable to other cultures than models of career concern and measures such as the *Career Maturity Inventory* and the *Career Development Inventory*. A possible reason for this contrast is that level I variables concentrate on continuity and stability in occupational interests and vocational dispositions, whereas level II variables emphasize change and development across the life-span.

Level III: Career Narratives

Level III personality theories involve self-defining, life stories that are substantive, retrospective narratives about the self and others. These internalized narratives of the self usually include reflective descriptions about how the individual adapted to tasks and traumas. In a sense, these narratives integrate stability (level I) with change (level II) in telling the complex story of how the individual has both developed and stayed the same. By constructing a plot, the narratives address the question of "Who am I?" The plot explains how they are agentic and to whom they feel connected. These stories of competence and connection impose a narrative structure on lived experience, one that explains the purpose and meaning for a life. The goal is to dramatically portray a dynamic life story and to narrate a theme or secret that makes a whole of an individual's

life. For McAdams (1995), it is essential that this life story bring overall unity, purpose, and meaning to a life. Although, narratives explain discrete episodes, as whole they consciously organize and bound together a life. They give a life meaningful continuity over time. In short, the narratives about life path compose a life, that is, they "provide a purposeful self-history that explains how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the anticipated self of tomorrow." (p. 382).

Through construction of meaning, life-enhancing narratives foster self-understanding and enrich and integrate self-organization (level I) and self-extension (level II). McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, and Mansfield (1997, p. 678) assert that narratives begin to emerge during late adolescence and early adulthood as individuals create a self out of fabric of their complex and contradictory experiences. They seek "to construct a more-or-less integrative narrative of the self to provide their life with a semblance of unity and purpose." In addition to being unique to adulthood, McAdams and his colleagues hypothesize that life narrative descriptors of personality are germane to high modern and postmodern democratic societies which emphasize individuation of the self. "From this standpoint, life stories are jointly constructed by the person whose story it is and the culture within which that story has its constitutive meanings" (McAdams et al., 1997, p. 690). North American cultures foster individualism and thus promote stories of uniqueness and identity. Therefore, life narratives (level III) are more unique than vocational dispositions (level I) or career concerns (level III) because these unique stories fully contextualize the self in time, place, and role.

In the vocational domain, the counterpart of life narrative descriptions of personality seems to be career; more precisely, subjective career. Level I and II personality theories typically

rely on objective conceptions of the individual formed by observers or resulting from personality inventories. In contrast, subjective life chronicle report of individuals' conceptions of their personalities from their own point of view as well as the meaning which they give to their lives. These narratives are not composed in terms of psychological traits or psychosocial concerns, instead they articulate needs and goals, purpose and action as well as the resultant life patterns-- the very·stuff of career. Career is how we interpret our work and understand our productive and generative strivings. It embodies dispositional continuity and psychosocial change. Career narratives concentrate on creating meaning for the work-role and their substance integrates individual lives with that of a community in telling about their productive and generative efforts to contribute to and cooperate with a social group. Miller-Tiedeman and Tiedeman (1985) best articulated the essence of these narratives when they defined career as "the imposition of direction on vocational behavior."

Level IV: Mechanisms of Development

McAdams (1995) tripartite scheme of dispositional traits, personal concerns, and life narratives concentrate on the "content" of personality. He acknowledges that "process" constructs do not fit neatly into the three levels. The tripartite model addresses "features of personality that are potential candidates for inclusion within the person's self-concept," that is the self as "me" rather than the ego processes of the "I" (McAdams, 1995, p. 390). In eschewing process while focusing on content, the model ignores variables such as learning, cognition, and decision making.· This coincides well with the vocational domain where researchers have generally ignored the actual mechanisms of vocational development. Research on the "process of career development" should not be mistaken as involving attention to true process variables.

Instead, the focus has been on attitudes, competencies, and beliefs that condition these process variables. Attitudes toward and beliefs about career choice and decisional competencies are not decision making. Thus, a comprehensive theory about career development requires attention to a fourth level of descriptors, a category that directly addresses mechanisms of action.

Although vocational psychologists such as Gati (1996), Hackett and Lent (1992), and Krumboltz (1994) have nominated learning and decision making as critical process variables for explaining the actual mechanisms of career development, I prefer the model of selective optimization with compensation (SOC) advanced by Baltes and his colleagues (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1996; Marsiske, Lang, Baltes, & Baltes, 1995) because it could link research in career development directly to a contemporary model in developmental psychology. Furthermore, the SOC model recommends itself to the study of career development because it was constructed to be applied to issues of general ontogenesis and domain-specific issues of adaptation. "Without specifying the substantive goals and outcomes of development, the SOC model is intended to characterize the processes that result in desired outcomes of development while minimizing undesirable ones" (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1996, p. 42). Thus, the SOC model can be used to comprehend the development of vocational personality types (level I), career concerns (level II), and subjective careers (level III).

Selective optimization with compensation is a conceptual model for analyzing changes in the adaptive potential of the self, or more simply, what is gained and what is loss by the person in everyday life. Baltes, Lindenberger, and Staudinger (1996, p. 37) view development as a process of selective adaptation and then define "successful development as the conjoint maximization of gains (desirable goals or outcomes) and the minimization of losses (avoidance of undesirable goals

of outcomes)." The central mechanism of development is transactional adaptation to the environment. The actual process of development involves selection and then selective change in adaptive capacity. Thus, the basic component processes for the development of age-related improvement in adaptive fitness are selection, optimization, and compensation.

"Selection involves goals or outcomes; Optimization involves goal-related means to achieve success (desired outcomes); and Compensation involves a response to loss in goal-relevant means in order to maintain success of desired level of functioning (outcomes)" (Baltes et al., 1996, p. 38). Optimization involves procedural methods and processes that generate and refine means-end resources to achieve selected goals. Because there is no selection without loss, the individual must compensate for these losses. Compensation constitutes the response to loss of resources that were previously available for goal striving. Compensation can mean development of new resources or a change in selected direction. "It is also assumed that in reality the three components are always intertwined, that they form a cooperative (interactive) system of behavioral action or outcome-oriented functioning" (Baltes et al., 1996, p. 42). Selection, optimization, and compensation can be internal or external, conscious or unconscious, and active or passive. Selection and compensation are tools for the optimization of development and means of striving for desired outcomes and goals. Therefore, selection, compensation, and optimization represent fundamental agentic processes of personality that actually constitute the processes for advancing development, operationally defined by improvements in adaptive fitness.

Clearly, the SOC model can be used to comprehend vocational personality types, explain career concerns, and provide a close reading of career narratives. However, to apply selective optimization with compensation at these three levels of analysis (psychological, psychosocial, and

self) requires the use of different conceptual models, research methods, and assessment materials. Nevertheless, at level I the SOC model may be useful in explaining the origins and development of vocational personality types. Certainly, selective optimization with compensation can be used to comprehend processes of self-organization and the development of dispositional response tendencies. Adaptive fitness also could help specify the dynamics involved in person-environment congruence. At level II, adolescent career concerns about selecting educational and vocational paths involve issues of separating from childhood certainties and the comfort of authority rooted in the past while optimizing strivings for uniqueness and compensating for loss of connection to childhood chums. At level III, the SOC model can be used to give close reading to career narratives. SOC processes can be used to highlight what is considered and selected as individuals become who they are, how choices are implemented and optimized, and which regrets people feel about paths not taken and concomitant losses.

<center>Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Career</center>

In this paper, I have outlines four propositions to structure a four-level framework for comprehending career theories and unifying them into a comprehensive model of careers. The first proposition states that the emergence of a RIASEC structure of personality is a precondition for adaptation. It represents the central structure of personality. The RIASEC model involves self-organization and it explains continuity and coherence in development. Stable RIASEC traits frame how adaptation takes place and influence potential for developmental changes. The adaptive orientation represented by a RIASEC type gives an individual a sense of continuity and coherence as well as provides coping processes to master developmental changes and to adapt

flexibly to changing circumstances.

The second proposition suggests that a secondary system of self-regulatory mechanisms emerges in conjunction with personality self-organization. These mechanisms, which remain generally the same throughout the life-span, meditate successful transactional adaptation. Currently, these mechanisms include concern, control, conviction, competence, and commitment (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). Their definitions integrate research findings from the career maturity literature with Erikson's (1950) constructs of psychosocial development. For example, career concern across the life span involves Erikson's trust versus mistrust theme, Super's future time perspective and planful attitudes, Crites' attitudes of orientation and involvement, Tiedeman and O'Hara's anticipation, and other closely related general purpose mechanisms such as optimism and hope.

Career narratives are the focus of the third proposition. Individuals who self-consciously reflect on their objective career can construct a subjective career in the form of a narrative. A career narrative comprehends the vocational self and shapes the further elaboration of this self-conception in the work world. Narratives about subjective career foster self-knowledge and clarify personal goals. A sense of subjective career heightens self-understanding and self-definition. Furthermore, subjective career guides adaptation as it negotiates opportunities and constraints, and uses the self-organized personality dispositions to address self-regulatory concerns.

The fourth proposition seeks to specify the actual processes of continuity and change in career adaptation by adopting Baltes and Baltes' (1990) model of selective optimization with compensation. The process of career development involves selection, optimization, and

compensation. These three processes can be used at the microbehavioral level to specify the actual processes and mechanisms of development for vocational personality types, career concerns, and career narratives.

Taken together, the self-organization of personality dispositions, self-regulatory concerns, self-definitional narratives, and selective optimization processes should be sufficient to portray the landscape of life-span career development.

Conclusion

This chapter, prompted by Osipow's (1990) article on convergence in career theories, describes an initial framework for research on unifying career theories into a comprehensive description of the structure and mechanism of vocational behavior across the life-span and in relation to other life roles. The framework consists of four propositions, emanating from transposing McAdam's (1995) tripartite model of personality theories to the vocational realm. At a minimum, this framework for conceptualizing career at the levels of personality dispositions, psychosocial concerns, self-construction, and mechanisms of development allows for the systematic comparison of career theories, including each theory's core constructs, their range of convenience, epistemic assumptions, and research domain. Career counselors are encouraged to continue to comprehend their clients' vocational behavior in terms of dispositions, concerns, and narratives while vocational psychologists work to link these variables into a comprehensive career theory.

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Appendix

Requirements of a Framework for Converging Career Theories

1. serve both life-course theorizing and stage-specific, function-centered theorizing.

2. emphasize connections between earlier and later developmental processes.

3. allow an open and plastic construction of career development.

4. not rely on age as a developmental organizer.

5. comprehend gains as well as losses.

6. avoid unique structural models for each stage.

7. specify mechanisms of development for microlevel analysis.

8. be bipolar and culturally sensitive.

9. attend to the particular contexts that constrain individual developmental pathways.

10. avoid normative and hierarchical connotations that privilege certain groups

11. reintegrate the developmental and differential perspectives on vocational behavior.

12. exploit conceptual advances in developmental psychology and life-course sociology.