

## SELF-CONCEPT THEORIES OF VOCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT<sup>\*</sup>

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Theory construction in vocational psychology has challenged a few, frightened many, and confused all--at one time or another. In discussing self-concept theories of vocational development, I must admit that I am experiencing an admixture of all of these feelings.

First, I am challenged by the problem that theory-building poses: how can we explain individual differences in vocational behavior? Why are some individuals able to make a vocational choice, when they are supposed to, whereas others cannot? Why are some realistic in their career decision-making whereas others are not? Why are some successful and satisfied after they enter the world-of-work whereas others are poorly adjusted to their jobs? Only if we can answer questions such as these can we increase our understanding of how and why people behave vocationally as they do.

Second, I am frightened by the complexities of attempting to construct a meaningful and useful theory of vocational behavior and development. Unlike physical scientists, educators and psychologists have generally been inadequately trained in philosophy of science and consequently have usually had little idea of how to go about the task of constructing theory. As Wrenn pointed out in 1959, however, this lack of background has not necessarily inhibited our theory-building behavior, and, I believe, at last count we had between 15 and 20 "theories" of vocational choice, adjustment, and development. Not one of these so-called "theories" even comes close

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\* Presented at American Personnel and Guidance Association Convention, Washington, D.C., April, 1966.

to meeting the criteria which philosophers of science have proposed for explaining behavioral phenomena. To be more confident, as well as more competent, in what we are trying to do, therefore, I would argue that we should educate ourselves further in the mysteries of theory construction before we engage in any more of this admittedly prestigious, but extremely risky, activity.

Finally, I am confused by where our theorizing has brought us, or left us, as the case may be. What has been done, and what remains undone? In other words, what can we conclude in retrospect, and what can we foresee in prospect? I would like to address myself to this question first by briefly reviewing theory construction in vocational psychology, in order to gain some historical perspective upon it; second, by making a critical analysis of self-concept theories of vocational development, not only because they are the topic of this symposium but also because they considerably outnumber others; and, third, by suggesting some different points of departure for theory construction in the future.

### Theory Construction in Retrospect

We usually think of self-concept theories of vocational development as being fairly recent in origin, i.e., during the last decade, and strictly speaking this is probably true, but like most conceptual schema they had their precursors in earlier attempts to explain certain vocational behaviors. I am referring here to the work which was done in the 1940's on conceptualizing the development of vocational interests. In his now classic paper on the formation of interest patterns during adolescence, Carter (1940) proposed that the individual's self-concept is intimately related to his occupational orientation, which, he concluded, is one of the primary solutions

to the problems of "growing up". According to Carter, interest patterns assist the individual to fit himself, with his idiosyncratic biological attributes, into somewhat rigid social structures or institutions. He acquires interests through his identification with some respected person or group. Many times the identification and the resulting interest pattern are appropriate, and the individual makes a good adjustment, but sometimes they are inappropriate, and he finds it necessary to discard or modify his interest pattern in order to solve the practical problems of everyday living. Similarly, in his 1943 theory of interests as "dynamic phenomena", Bordin (1943) argued that the individual's interests reflect his self-concept and his knowledge of occupational stereotypes by means of which he can find outlets for them. In 1949 Super (1949) drew upon these early conceptual schema of vocational interests, as well as the accumulated research literature to that time, to propose that interests are the outgrowth of the interrelationships of many factors, including the self-concept as it evolves from personal and social evaluations of vocationally relevant role-playing experiences.

Two years later, Super (1951) extended this conceptualization to apply to vocational choice. He observed that: "The choice of an occupation is one of the points in life at which a young person is called upon to state rather explicitly his concept of himself, to say definitely 'I am this or that kind of person'" (Super, 1951, p. 88). As the individual grows older, he integrates the various pictures he has of himself into a consistent self-concept, which he strives to preserve and enhance through all of his activities, but particularly through those that are occupational. He attempts to select a vocation which will be compatible with his self-concept

and which will allow him to make it a reality by permitting him to play the role he wants to play. Super (1953) cast these ideas into a developmental framework in 1953, when he formulated the following three propositions:

1. "The process of vocational development is essentially that of developing and implementing a self concept: it is a compromise process in which the self concept is a product of the interaction of inherited aptitudes, neural and endocrine make-up, opportunity to play various roles, and evaluations of the extent to which the results of role playing meet with the approval of superiors and fellows."

2. "The process of compromise between individual and social factors, between self concept and reality, is one of role playing, whether the role is played in fantasy, in the counseling interview, or in real life activities such as school classes, clubs, part-time work, and entry jobs."

3. "Work satisfactions and life satisfactions depend upon the extent to which the individual finds adequate outlets for his abilities, interests, personality traits, and values; they depend upon his establishment in a type of work, a work situation, and a way of life in which he can play the kind of role which his growth and exploratory experiences have led him to consider congenial and appropriate."

In his Psychology of Careers, which appeared in 1957, Super (1957) organized and summarized the literature on vocational choice and adjustment accordingly to these and related propositions.

Tiedeman and his associates (Tiedeman & Pandit, 1958; O'Hara & Tiedeman, 1959; Kibrick & Tiedeman, 1961) have also related the self to vocational choice, but in a somewhat different way than Super. They have emphasized experiences more than Super has, and they have conceived of the self more as the individual's evaluation than his perception of himself, which

continually changes as he progresses from one educational or vocational "position" to another. According to this viewpoint, the self and the processes of vocational development interact and affect each other as the individual copes with the problems of pursuing a course of training or attaining success in a job. Probably the most articulate and comprehensive statement of a self-concept theory of vocational development, however, was made in 1963 by Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, and Jordaan, when they undertook the task of translating theoretical constructs into operational terms and measuring procedures, so that hypotheses could be appropriately and directly tested. Before this work was begun, both Super and Tiedeman had drawn heavily upon traditional trait-and-factor measures to assess the self-concept, but it soon became apparent that such an approach only widened the already existing gap between theory and measurement, since the "trait" self was simply not equivalent to the "phenomenal" self. Not until the idea of using an individual's own universe of self-descriptive statements was hit upon did it become possible, for the first time, to evaluate self-vocational theory empirically. Most of the studies which have been reported in this series of sessions on vocational development have stemmed from the conceptual and measurement model which was presented in the 1963 monograph. The question now is: how useful is the model?

#### Evaluation of Self-Concept Theories of Vocational Development

There are several ways to answer this question. One is to analyze self-concept theories of vocational development with reference to their subsumptive value. That is, how well do they "account for the data?". Another is to test their internal consistency. Are the interrelationships of the propositions which comprise them logically valid? A third is to

determine the extent to which predictions deduced from them have been empirically confirmed. Probably the most meaningful criterion of the usefulness of self-theories, however, is whether they lead to a greater understanding of the "how" and "why" of vocational development phenomena. If they do, then they will solve the problem for which any theory of behavior is constructed. This problem is to explain the relationship which obtains between S or stimulus and R or response variables when (1) variations in S are not followed by proportional variations in R or (2) variations in R occur without antecedent variations in S. In other words, whenever there are disproportionalities in the relationship between S and R, theoretical constructs are usually introduced to account for them. These constructs may be of four different types: (1) animistic concepts, such as the "soul" and "libido"; (2) neuro-physiological variables, such as "excitatory and inhibitory" states; (3) response-inferred concepts, such as Lewin's "life space"; and (4) intervening variables, such as "habit strength" in Hullian learning theory (Spence, 1944).

In terms of the ways in which they are defined, both linguistically and operationally, self-concept variables, whether they involve the individual's perceptions or evaluations of himself, can be classified as response-inferred constructs. From an individual's self-report, elicited either by instruments such as adjective check lists and Q-sorts or the CPS modification of Kelly's Rep Test, we infer the nature of his self-concept--the characteristics he attributes to himself as a person and/or the positive and negative attitudes he has towards himself. In fact, we typically go further and summarize the individual's self-descriptive endorsements on some higher level of abstraction. Thus, Super (1963) has made distinctions between primary and secondary self percepts and simple

and complex self-concepts, and has introduced the notion of the self-concept system to subsume lower order, less well-organized self-concepts. Once these synthesizing hypothetical constructs are formulated, the next step is to use them to explain the individual's behavior.

Probably the most detailed explication of this process is provided by Starishevsky and Matlin's (1963) "model for the translation of self concepts into vocational terms", in which they illustrate how Psychtalk is related to Occtalk in career decision-making. For example, if an individual perceives of himself as "intelligent, healthy, and broad-minded", and if he also perceives psychologists as "intelligent, healthy, and broad-minded", then his choice of "psychologist" as a vocation is presumably explained by the agreement between the self and occupational attributes. It is important to note that in this process of reasoning, however, the self is not linked to stimulus variables. Unlike intervening variables, which, as their name implies, are conceptually and operationally related to both the S and R sides of the behavioral equation, the "self" is strictly a response-inferred construct. This difference between the two types of constructs can be represented graphically as shown in Figure 1, where a depicts an intervening variable and b a response-inferred concept.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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As such, it has certain limitations as an explanatory concept. Of these, the most frequently cited one (Bergmann, 1943; Goodstein, 1961; Spence, 1944) is that the response-response propositions or laws of self theories provide us with little or no understanding of the variables which are related to the development of different kinds of self-concepts,

e.g., clear, stable, or realistic. As a consequence, not only is our ability to bring about changes in vocational behavior restricted, but it becomes apparent that self theories are largely "closed systems", characterized by a certain circularity of reasoning which is intuitively unsatisfying if not logically fallacious. Another shortcoming of self theories is even more serious, however, because it directly pertains to their explanatory power. Since both the self and vocational behavior are response variables, the individual (the organism) is inextricably confounded with them in their interrelationships. Even though the operational procedures used to define the self and vocational behavior are wholly independent experimentally, which, parenthetically, is often not the case, the most parsimonious explanation of any correlations which are found between them is that they are simply manifestations of the same response tendency. In fact, the lack of correlations may be similarly explained: some state or condition of the organism may obscure what might otherwise be a relationship between the self and vocational behavior. To put the dilemma more succinctly, self theory leaves us pretty much where we began--trying to explain individual differences in vocational behavior, except that now we must also explain the presence or absence of common variance with the self.

#### Theory Construction in Prospect

If this is actually the state of affairs with self theories of vocational development, then it is legitimate to ask: what can be done to enhance their explanatory value? I think the answer to this question is a straightforward one but far from a simple one. It is this: the response-inferred hypothetical constructs of self-theories need to be transformed into intervening variable constructs by linking them with stimulus variables.

In order to make such linkages, it would be necessary, first, to identify those instances in which there are disproportionalities in the behavioral equation. More specifically, it would seem that the most promising starting point would be the case when stimuli have constant values but responses nevertheless vary. For example: there is the general expectation in our society that all males should declare a vocational choice, at one point or another in their vocational development, before they enter the world-of-work, but only some are able to do this. In other words, a certain percentage are usually undecided about what they want to do. Here, then, is a situation in which the stimulus, the societal expectation of vocational choice, is a constant yet there is variation in response--choice and no choice. We can now ask why this disproportionality obtains and search for the antecedent conditions which may be related to the development of self-concepts that lead to the making of a career decision and those that do not. Thus, we might adopt Roe's (1957) concepts of parental acceptance, avoidance, and concentration, and hypothesize that clarity of self-concept, for example, is related to a certain constellation of these attitudes, on the one hand, and either choice or no choice, on the other. If research confirms our hypotheses, then the self-concept will have been tied-up to both a stimulus and a response dimension and will be a true intervening variable. I think this is the prospect, and the challenge, for self theories of vocational development in the future.

Figure 1

Intervening Variable and response-inferred constructs  
(after Spence, 1944).

S - VARIABLES

I - VARIABLES

R - VARIABLES

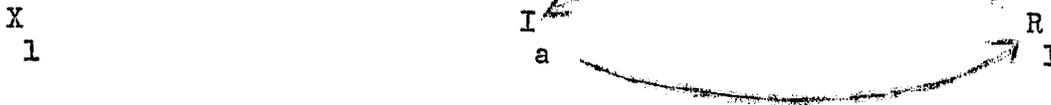


a. An intervening variable construct

S - VARIABLES

I - VARIABLES

R - VARIABLES



a. A response-inferred construct

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