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The Need for a Theory of Vocational Behavior *

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A couple of years ago, when still a staff member with the Career Pattern Study, I had occasion to discuss the project with a gentleman who, coming out of the Kentucky hills twenty-five years before, had made a successful career in New York City real estate. My phrasing here is an understatement; this gentleman owned several tall New York office buildings; he thus satisfied with a vengeance at least one of the external criteria of vocational success.

After listening awhile to my labored efforts at description of the Career Pattern Study, he interrupted to say, "You mean, you're trying to figure out why one fellow becomes a banker and another a horse thief." Being a compulsive theory-minded character, threatened by such penetrating simplicity, I was tempted to explain to this man of finance that the differences between bankers and horse thieves are not really so clear cut. I am indebted to him, however, for epitomizing the purpose of theory in vocational guidance; theories emerge in the form of tentative answers to questions like the one the gentleman raised.

Essentially, theories may be considered as generalized statements which enable us to account for the occurrence of events in a specified class, for example, a decision to enter nursing, or a decision to drop out of school, or the achievement of 90 plus on a test, or of 60 minus on the same test. The theory usually explains this event by connecting it, as an instance of its class, to some defined class of prior events or conditions. We may use different theoretical statements to explain the same event. We might say, for example, that a fellow becomes a horse thief because of moral weakness (implying that he is a member of a class of individuals possessing the property of moral weakness), and/or because he is displacing agression against his father, and/or because he has an obsession about horses. In vocational guidance parlance, we might state that he has vocational interests in the field of horse thievery. Hypothetically, we might then point to an empirical datum: an A+ on the Strong scale for horse thieves!

It is not my intent to disparage such statements nor to criticize the Strong scale, whose merits are sufficiently established to suffer nothing from my comment. I am trying to suggest, however, that we employ theory in our guidance practice whether we like it or not. Any vocational appraisal, any encouragement of client efforts at occupational exploration, rests on a host of assumptions about the determinants of human behavior and about the determinants of change in the occupational structure. The issue thus concerns what kinds of theories -- not whether we should have any -- and to what degree we can make them explicit, and test their "truthfulness".

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If, in fact, we were concerned with the field of horse thievery, one or more of the aforementioned statements could be used as a spring board for a succession of theoretical propositions. For example: children who read wild west comic books tend to be interested in horse thievery; children in families which lack cohesiveness look to comic books as fantasy outlets. A network of causal statements such as these would constitute a model of the process by which a boy or girl becomes a horse thief. A necessary additional step involves tests to see whether the model would adequately incorporate empirical data about children who become horse thieves and would exclude children who do not become horse thieves. (The "exclusion" notion refers to John Mills' canon of differences.) A theory is thus built concurrently by induction from already observed relationships and by deduction of new hypotheses which, when tested against new samples of kids, provide the grounds for revising the theory.

Now we reach a frustrating phase of a ten minute paper on a topic of this order of complexity. Some of you will perceive a gross oversimplification of the process of theory building. Others may perceive a specious professionalism in the coinage of such terms as vocational behavior, vocational development, and vocational maturity; they might even suspect a possible effort to garner prestige by employing the jargon of behavioral science. Others will question the diversion of energy to theory building, pointing to the practitioners' need for refinement of psychometric techniques, for the enhancement of information about the occupational structure, for the improvement of counseling methods, etc.. Others will point to the improbability, given the present work schedules of guidance practitioners -- clerical chores, college recommendations, pressure from college aspiring parents -- to steal sufficient time for vocational appraisal in length and depth. Why then the concern for the long career when concrete guidance services probably will continue to touch only a limited segment of the developmental span of students and clients?

There is no time to respond to such reservations. I have mentioned them mainly to indicate that we are not unaware of them. I would prefer to devote the remaining few minutes, however, to a quick scanning of the considerations which have led to the efforts at theory building and to the methods of data analysis which will be discussed this morning. The views here are my own; they may occasionally be at considerable variance from those of my colleagues on the panel. I shall state them as a series of informal propositions.

1. A basic assumption: regardless of the limitations of guidance facilities and functions, it is the scientific study and service to the individual human career over its entire span which identifies the field of guidance; insofar as the career runs through the social channels of work, guidance is vocational.

2. Corollary to the first proposition, the human career is an appropriate object of scientific inquiry. There are implications here which many in the field of guidance may not wish to accept. The proposition implies not only a favorable regard for psychological tests and systematic appraisal, but also the assumption that the human career is orderly, that its lawful determinants can be identified and used in prediction and control of that career. (In spite of its implications, I see no necessary threat in this proposition to the individual's "right" to freedom of choice.)

3. The traditional array of vocational guidance concepts, for example, vocational interest and aptitude, is insufficient to the needs of career research. The vocational maturity concept to be discussed today represents an attempt to close a gap in our array of concepts. Likewise, the notion of vocational behavior has been set forth in order to provide a means of defining the units of observation needed to measure an individual's vocational maturity.

4. Self-concept terminology and phenomenological constructs generally, in spite of their interim descriptive value, do not promise to further career research. In view of the increased interest over the past decade in self-concept among social psychologists, my position may seem somewhat lonely and cantankerous. My views have partly resulted, I guess, from disillusionment in efforts to apply the self-concept to practical research problems. But my skepticism is addressed to the research efficacy of mentalistic constructs generally, to what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle has labeled "ghost in the machine" terminology.

5. The formulation of vocational theory which is formal, explicit and unified is essential to progress in vocational guidance, even if the theory suggests no immediate ways to improve guidance practices. Such theory would help to guide the collection of data and give meaning to the empirical relationships which we may find in our individual studies. Hopefully, such theory will help the study of unknown occupations, for example, the career of space traveller. Last Fall, Harold Pepinsky guessed that the ideal space traveller might be a female midget with a Ph.D. in Physics from M.I.T.& With adequate theory we would be able to refine guesses like that made by Dr. Pepinsky. (I am not sure that we could make our profiles any more colorful.) It might even be feasible, by skillful interpolation, to apply knowledge of the determinants of horse thievery to the prediction of attributes needed for success in the space travel occupations.

6. Like the work of the nineteenth century economists, these propositions about vocational determinants may have overtones of a dismal science. They may seem to stifle the romance of a human career within a set of categories. I find no necessary conflict, however, between an effort at scientific theory building and a humanistic perspective on work as self-fulfillment. Paradoxically, the application of scientific methods might enhance the opportunity for individuals to resolve questions of personal identity and satisfaction surrounding their entry and continuance in particular occupations.

7. Finally, while it is hoped that the notions discussed in this paper will be considered seriously, their most central assertion is that propositions concerning what is true and important for vocational guidance will probably continue to change, including the propositions made during the past ten minutes. A proper role of any scientific theory is to guide the efforts of those who would replace it!