

Chapter 6 - Integration of Theory, Research, and Practice: Using Our Tools to Address Challenging Times

Saba Rasheed Ali

Samantha D. Brown

University of Iowa

This chapter appears in J. P. Sampson, E. Bullock-Yowell, V. C. Dozier, D. S. Osborn, & J. G. Lenz (Eds.), *Integrating theory, research, and practice in vocational psychology: Current status and future directions*. Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University. <http://doi.org/10.17125/svp2016.ch6>

The chapter is based on a paper presented at the conference of the Society of Vocational Psychology, May 16–17, 2016, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL. A video presentation of a preliminary version of this paper may be retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGWX9ajKB_M&list=PLCsXiACK-LKrVRKb1z_Nw3METZg-SoRFA&index=8

Appreciation is expressed to Emily Bullock-Yowell, Jim Sampson, and Janet Lenz for their comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

Correspondence should be addressed to Saba Rasheed Ali, Division of Psychological & Quantitative Foundations, 361 Lindquist Center, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242. E-mail: saba-ali@uiowa.edu

Keywords: 21st century, career counseling, global workforce, global economy, public policy, vocational psychology

We live in challenging times. This is made clear by continuous discussions of the state of the economy, stagnant wages, and lack of gainful employment in different communities across the U.S. Many of these challenges have resulted from the movement of the industrial era into the technological era (Blustein, 2017). Blustein (2017) acknowledges that “one very challenging result of these radical changes in the economy is a declining job market for full-time, stable, and long-term work, which has led to growing levels of underemployment.” Thus, both unemployment and underemployment are concerns for many workers.

Vocational psychologists and career counselors have much to contribute to help workers with these challenges, but it is imperative for the profession to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century workforce. Theories used to understand and describe people’s career development and work experiences are the foundation of vocational psychology. Theories can inform research that can in turn inform practice. While this progression is sometimes viewed as logical and linear, the reality is that theories, research, and practice need to be better integrated so they can address the practical issues facing the global labor force.

Integration implies bidirectional relationships between each of these concepts, such that each informs the other and the process is iterative, not linear. Integration, while challenging, is necessary in order for vocational psychology to both remain relevant and promote positive change for the people it serves. In this chapter, we will discuss how these theories can meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century workforce.

Theories Presented

The authors of the section one chapters provide us with in-depth descriptions of how five theories, social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; 2000), Holland’s theory of person-environment fit (Holland, 1997), counseling for work and relationship (CWR; Richardson, 2017), cognitive information processing theory (CIP; Sampson, 2017), and systems theory framework (STF; Patton & McMahon, 2017), have already integrated theory, research, and practice and how those theories can continue to grow. Despite their differences, all five theories contribute to the field of vocational psychology and to the understanding of careers and work life. These theories have helped and can continue to help people achieve their work-related goals. Further, these theories have also informed vocational

psychology and career counseling practice through research studies, primarily through nonintervention research. The majority of these research studies have furthered our understanding of how the theories apply to the career development of individuals and inform practice with college populations. While this body of work provides a good foundation for the field of vocational psychology, there is still much work to be done with underrepresented populations, such as unemployed and underemployed adults especially given current labor market demands and issues.

Challenges

A significant challenge related to the work lives of individuals is the growing income and wealth disparity that is partly a result of the shifting nature of work, with low skill manufacturing jobs increasingly becoming automated and shifting workers toward lower paying services work (Autor & Dorn, 2013). Job polarization (i.e., growth in high and low income jobs with a decline of typical middle class jobs) has caused economic shifts over the last two decades, resulting in greater income disparities. Katz (2010) described how this shift has been occurring over the last 20 years with high-end, high skill jobs and low wage service jobs seeing strong growth while traditional middle class jobs, such as manufacturing production jobs and middle management positions (such those in the auto and heavy machinery industry), saw little to no growth. Katz argued the following:

The typical high-wage jobs of non-college men and many middle class jobs for those with college training have been hard hit. ...Many job losers from sectors such as construction and manufacturing may face difficulties in making the psychological and financial adjustments as well as gaining the training and education required for the new jobs available in the growing (primarily service) sectors. (p. 6)

The issues of psychological adjustment for individuals required to make the shift is especially poignant for vocational psychologists. Ali, Hoffman, and Fall (2013) suggested three intersectional issues arise when individuals lose their job: a loss of identity, status, and community. Wisman and Pacitti (2014) suggested that one way to reset the economy is by “guaranteeing

employment accompanied by retraining to enable all unemployed workers to become absorbed in the regular workforce” (p. 679). Vocational psychologists’ understanding of the psychological issues related to transitions gives them a unique perspective on job loss. We have theories that provide an understanding of the contextual issues facing workers in the 21st century (e.g., globalization, labor market issues, racism) as well as individual factors (e.g., skills, abilities, cognitive mechanisms). It is a matter of how we use these theories to meet the challenges of workers in the 21st century that will help shape the present and future of vocational psychology.

Opportunities

As stated by Lent (2017) and Reardon (2017), challenges are also opportunities for vocational psychologists to better bridge the gaps between theory, research, and practice. Based on the challenges outlined in the beginning of this chapter and the current state of these theories, this section will describe some of the opportunities that may exist for vocational psychologists’ tools to be used to their fullest extent. This section will highlight two areas of opportunity: publicly engaged scholarship and public policy efforts.

Publicly Engaged Scholarship

Integrating research and practice in a way that better addresses the challenges many clients face in the global economy requires a publicly engaged approach to research and scholarship. Publicly engaged scholarship is a scholarly endeavor that “cuts across instruction, research and creative activities, and service; fulfills unit and university missions; and focuses on collaboration with and benefits to communities external to the university” (Glass, Doberneck, & Schweitzer, 2011, p. 9). Sampson (2017) provided an excellent set of recommendations, and both literally and figuratively showed us a model for the future that has direct relevance to our changing and challenging times. The Florida State University Career Center is an example of an institutional setting that provides service both to university students and the larger community. The center provides theoretically-based services, and the staff regularly conduct research studies to better understand these services and their effects.

Sampson (2017) argues that these types of agencies can serve as “laboratories” where collaborative relationships can live between researchers and practitioners. Solberg and Ali (2017) argue that One-Stop Career Centers that are a part of state workforce development agencies would be a good place for these types of laboratories. Publicly engaged scholarship assumes that everyone, including practitioners, theorists, researchers and the public, is creating the knowledge of practice together. No one owns it, and everyone has a stake in it (Glass, Doberneck, & Schweitzer, 2011).

Public Policy

Lent (2017) articulated the importance of the gap between research and practice and offered a good explanation from an environmental perspective. Researchers and practitioners often do “live” in different environments and may have different interest profiles and, of course, have different presses and expectations. However, Lent suggested an area where both practitioners and researchers might join together: public policy. While no effort is perfect, it is very encouraging to see more interest in public policy among practitioners and researchers alike. The National Career Development Association has been making efforts in this area for years and SVP members are also starting to get active in the policy arena.

One example of an initiative headed by a vocational psychologist (Scott Solberg) is the Massachusetts Institute for College and Career Readiness (MICCR). This is a collaboration between Boston University, MassINC Gateway Cities Innovation Institute, and the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, that was developed in close partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA ESE). Solberg and colleagues initiated MICCR so that communities working to design, implement, and evaluate educational programming would have access to researchers who had expertise in research design and evaluation. MICCR partners senior academic researchers with Massachusetts school district personnel so they can collaborate on evaluation projects important to the school district. MICCR may serve as a model for other areas of need such as helping to improve the delivery of services within workforce development centers. Ali et al. (2017) discuss

how these partnerships could lead to career development researchers and agencies tasked with adult employment services working together to influence local and state policies and help direct funding to services (e.g., career counseling, job training). This type of collaboration can serve to better integrate research, theory, and practice, while also informing lawmakers and members of the public about the value of career services, especially for those at greatest risk in the global economy.

Conclusion

Vocational psychologists have the opportunity to use theories, research, and practice to help workers in the 21st century economy by pursuing further integration of the three areas. As this chapter outlines, theories presented at the 2016 SVP Biennial Conference can help workers better understand the context and skills needed to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century workforce. Additional work is needed to further expand the application of the theories discussed (SCCT, Holland, CIP, CWR, and STF) to underserved populations, such as people facing unemployment and underemployment. Creative approaches are needed to address these concerns, through opportunities such as publicly engaged scholarship and public policy efforts. These opportunities can only be capitalized upon through the combined efforts of theorists, researchers, and practitioners. Addressing the challenges of the global workforce through scholarship based in communities of practice may directly benefit those in need of services as well as help advance the vocational psychology field through the application and refinement of theories, making them more relevant to the real life challenges of individuals who need these services most.

References

- Ali, S. R., Flanagan, S., Pham, A. & Howard, K. A. S. (2017). Translating the career and workforce development knowledge base for practitioners and policy makers. In V. S. H. Solberg & S. R. Ali (Eds.), *Handbook of career and workforce development research, practice, and policy* (pp. 376–398). London: Routledge.

- Ali, S. R., Fall, K., & Hoffman, T. (2013). Life without work: Understanding social class changes and unemployment through theoretical integration. *Journal of Career Assessment, 21*(1), 111–126.
- Autor, D., & Dorn, D. (2013, August 24). How technology wrecks the middle class. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/how-technology-wrecks-the-middle-class/?_r=0
- Blustein, D. L. (2017). Promising career and workforce development practices in supporting the needs of unemployed populations. In V. S. H. Solberg & S. R. Ali (Eds.), *Handbook of career and workforce development research, practice, and policy* (pp. 376–398). London: Routledge.
- Glass, C. R., Doberneck, D. M., & Schweitzer, J. H. (2011). Unpacking faculty engagement: The types of activities faculty members report as publicly engaged scholarship during promotion and tenure. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 15*(1), 7–30.
- Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments*, (3rd ed.). Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc.
- Katz, L. (2010, April 29). *Long-term unemployment in the great recession. Testimony to the Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress.*
- Lent, R. W. (2017). Integration of theory, research, and practice. In J. P. Sampson, E. Bullock-Yowell, V. C. Dozier, D. S. Osborn, & J. G. Lenz (Eds.), *Integrating theory, research, and practice in vocational psychology: Current status and future directions* (pp. 20). Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17125/svp2016.ch1>
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 45*, 79–122.
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (2000). Contextual supports and barriers to career choice: a social cognitive analysis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 47*(1), 36–49. doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.47.1.36
- Patton, W., & McMahon, M. (2017). The systems theory framework of career development. In J. P. Sampson, E. Bullock-Yowell, V. C. Dozier, D. S. Osborn, & J. G. Lenz (Eds.), *Integrating theory, research, and practice in vocational psychology: Current status and future directions* (pp. 50). Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17125/svp2016.ch4>
- Rearidon, R. C. (2017). Holland's integration of career theory, research, and practice. In J. P. Sampson, E. Bullock-Yowell, V. C. Dozier, D. S. Osborn, & J. G. Lenz (Eds.), *Integrating theory, research, and practice in vocational psychology: Current status and future directions* (pp. 28). Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17125/svp2016.ch2>
- Richardson, M. S. (2017). Counseling for work and relationship: A practice-driven theoretical approach. In J. P. Sampson, E. Bullock-Yowell, V. C. Dozier, D. S. Osborn, & J. G. Lenz (Eds.), *Integrating theory, research, and practice in vocational psychology: Current status and future directions* (pp. 40). Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17125/svp2016.ch3>
- Sampson, J. P. Jr. (2017). A cognitive information processing theory for career choices: Challenges and opportunities for integrating theory, research, and practice. In J. P. Sampson, E. Bullock-Yowell, V. C. Dozier, D. S. Osborn, & J. G. Lenz (Eds.), *Integrating theory, research, and practice in vocational psychology: Current status and future directions* (pp. 62). Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17125/svp2016.ch5>
- Solberg, V. S. H., & Ali, S. R. (2017). Career and workforce development research, practice, and policy: Synthesis and future directions. In V. S. H. Solberg & S. R. Ali (Eds.), *Handbook of career and workforce development research, practice, and policy* (pp. 399–439). London: Routledge.
- Wisman, J. D., & Pacitti, A. (2014). Ending the unemployment crisis with guaranteed employment and retraining. *Journal of Economic Issues, 48*(3), 679–706. doi.org/10.2753/jei0021-3624480305