

## Chapter 17 - Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice in Vocational Psychology: Perspectives of a *Journal of Vocational Behavior* Editorial Board Member

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The fundamental role of the field's academic journals is to disseminate knowledge and contribute to understandings of psychological and vocational phenomenon. Hence, journals report on research that makes a unique contribution to current knowledge so that we can better understand and predict behavior (e.g., cognitions, emotions, development, etc.). Because vocational psychology is an applied science, theory and research are used to inform practice and guide interventions to improve people's lives. We look to our journals to define our field, stimulate innovative thought, and inspire future research endeavors.

Although a generally shared assumption of our profession is that research informs theory and practice, and vice versa, not all vocational psychologists cross these domains in their professional roles and activities. Likewise, each journal contributes a unique perspective and emphasis on this integration. The focus of this chapter is to reflect on how *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (*JVB*) editorial policies shape the integration of theory, research, and practice by examining the relevancy, challenges, and opportunities related to this integration. Suggestions for future directions are also provided. First, a brief introduction to the history and scope of the journal is offered.

### History and Scope of the Journal

The *JVB* publishes articles that make a substantive contribution to existing knowledge, have a theoretical grounding, and provide practical relevance. The journal publishes primarily empirical articles and considers conceptual articles if they make a strong theoretical contribution. In 1971, Sam Osipow founded the journal and intentionally named it *Journal of Vocational Behavior*—not Vocational Psychology—to emphasize the aim of publishing research across the lifespan with contributions from sociologists, industrial-organizational psychologists, and human resource personnel. Despite this broad emphasis, contributions were strictly from the perspective of the individual, not the organization (M. L. Savickas, personal communication, February 26, 2016). The journal, which grew from one volume per year to two in 1974, is currently at Volume 93 with six volumes published each year. The current impact factor of 2.59 ranks the *JVB* eighth out of 76 applied psychology journals (Fouad, 2016). The impact factor measures the frequency with which the average article in the journal has been cited in a particular year.

One of the strengths of *JVB* continues to be the breadth of topics it represents. In particular, the journal bridges two distinct, yet related approaches to studying work behavior and environments. The two

broad and overlapping fields of vocational psychology and industrial-organizational psychology both benefit by informing each other of their methods and findings to create a synergy in which an innovative, interdisciplinary science could be cultivated. Articles generally report on research that tests theories, builds upon existing theories, or suggests new theories or understandings of work behaviors and contexts. This is consistent with what Sharf (2013) described as intentional research—that which sets out to test concepts, constructs, or propositions of a theory, as opposed to unintentional research which relates to a theory, but is not specifically designed to test aspects of a theory. Qualitative research that adheres to rigorous research methods contributes knowledge to underexplored areas, thereby contributing to theory building and expanding theories to diverse populations.

One specific intent of *JVB* is to communicate how research findings advance theory. Hence, it is important that the theoretical rationale for the study is clearly articulated and closely aligned with the development of hypotheses and that testing the stated hypotheses results in findings that offer specific implications that advance theory (cf. Gati, 2016). The *JVB* primarily publishes empirical research on vocational choice, occupational aspirations, career adaptability, career exploration, job search, organizational socialization, the influences of cultural context, job performance and satisfaction, career success, theories of work adjustment, adult vocational development, organizational commitment and job involvement, multiple role management, work role salience, work-leisure relationship, midlife career change, work transitions, and special issues on topics of interest (Fouad, 2016).

### **Relevance of Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice**

As suggested in the previous section, the integration of theory, research, and practice is central to the field of vocational psychology. This integration is highly relevant, as it can advance knowledge, suggest best practices, and provide a foundation for the education and training of vocational psychologists (Fouad & Jackson, 2013). Theory informs research by guiding the development of testable hypotheses, driving the development of assessment measures, and interpreting

research findings in meaningful ways that suggest areas for the refinement of existing theory and the development of new theories. This research then leads to implications for effective evidence-based practice. The integration of theory and research is integral to the editorial policy of *JVB*. Research published by the journal must be grounded in theory and make a meaningful and unique contribution to theory. Indeed, many have suggested that a strength of the field is its reliance on theory and its strong empirical tradition of pursuing research within the context of theory (Hesketh, 2001; Karr & Larson, 2005; Sampson et al., 2014; Savickas, 2001; Subich, 2001). This led Subich (2001) to conclude that the practice of grounding research in theory has advanced theory and facilitated the construction of a well-organized body of knowledge and widely used assessment tools (cf. Gati, 2016) and counseling methods that are derived from—and linked to—theory.

Theory-driven research is crucial for several reasons. It provides an organized framework from which meaningful questions can be posed, thus reducing the generation of unconnected facts (Karr & Larson, 2005; Meehl, 1978; Strong, 1991). It also fuels a compelling need for research that informs practice by facilitating the development of interventions that address career and life concerns across the life span (Fouad & Jackson, 2013; Karr & Larson, 2005). The integration of theory, research, and practice provides a strategic position from which opportunities for growth and change in the field can occur (Fouad & Jackson, 2013). Examples of such changes include applying existing theories to new populations and developing new theoretical models to explain and predict a broad range of work related behaviors; attitudes; cognitions; and personal, social, and emotional aspects of work life. The development of constructionist and constructivist postmodern perspectives and innovative theories with testable propositions has moved the field forward (cf. Furbish & Smith, 2016). Career construction (Savickas, 2005), life-design (Savickas et al., 2009), and the psychology of working (Blustein, 2006; 2013) are examples of several new vocational theories that have set the stage for innovative lines of research that address the complexity of people's lives within dynamic contexts.

Although the integration of practice with theory and research is relevant to our field, should it be a focus in all of our journals? Although there is value

in both basic and applied research, the extent to which career counseling practitioners view the empirical and theoretical work of vocational psychologists as relevant to their work is unclear (Subich, 2001). Moreover, the connection between theory, research, and practice varies tremendously across journals (e.g., Duffy, 2016; Flores, 2016; Furbish & Smith, 2016; Gati, 2016). *JVB* is generally not a practice journal. Its focus has historically been on theoretically-driven research, not the integration of practice. Other journals (e.g., *Journal of Career Development* and *Career Development Quarterly*), however, have an explicit focus on practice (Duffy, 2016; Flores, 2016).

### Challenges in Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice

Despite the long-standing gap between science and practice, challenges remain with regard to where and how the integration of theory, research, and practice should occur (see also Duffy, 2016; Flores, 2016; Furbish & Smith, 2016; Gati, 2016). Theories of vocational behavior are distinct from theories of career counseling. For example, the cognitive information processing approach (Peterson, Sampson, Lenz, & Reardon, 2002) provides a clear framework for translating theory into practice with specific interventions. Whereas, life design (Savickas et al., 2009) provides less explicit suggestions for intervention. There continues to be a need for scientific endeavors that promote new knowledge in a manner that is accessible to practitioners, perhaps through intervention research or a focus on practice-relevant topics (Subich, 2001). A challenge identified by Duffy and Flores is that most published articles are written by those whose main focus is research, not practice. Therefore, practice implications identified in vocational journals are limited to the extent that most authors are not actively engaged in practice activities and may not be as aware of emerging practice concerns (Duffy, 2016; Flores, 2016).

Some (e.g., Subich, 2001) have suggested that our journals' limited attention to practice may be resulting in avoiding important issues in the field, such as intervention research and applications of theories to underserved and disempowered populations (Duffy, 2016). The psychology of working (Blustein, 2013) is

one such theory to emerge that emphasizes an inclusive framework that includes the poor and working class.

Vocational psychology is one discipline that supports practice; there are others. Although some professionals may be active across the three domains of theory, research, and practice, most are likely not (Subich, 2001). The professional roles of vocational psychologists and career counselors are diverse, which has led some to question the relevance of vocational psychology's research questions and paradigms to career counseling practice and the extent to which practitioners need to be engaged in practice-based research. Professional journals may not be conducive to the translation of research to practical applications (Lucas, 1996). Instead, professional organizations, and not necessarily academic journals, may be the locations in which meaningful communication between the disciplines can occur (cf. Fouad, 2001) and where collaborations can be formed to initiate the translation of research into practice.

It has been suggested that we cannot continue to have vocational psychology theories that do not inform industrial/organizational psychology and vice versa. One potential role of *JVB* could be to encourage submissions for special issues that insist on the inclusion of researchers from both disciplines to represent and integrate multiple perspectives (Fouad, personal communication). I will discuss the potential means by which this might be done in the opportunities section to follow.

It is important to continue to make our work more relevant to a broader range of the national and global population. This is reflected in the growing international focus of the journal both in terms of authors and participants across national contexts. Global migration of people and work has given rise to a whole host of new issues and challenges in work lives and workplaces. International collaborations have spurred another area of growth and innovative thinking that is reflected in our manuscripts. These trends have broadened our focus and enriched scholarship, but they have also challenged the integration of theory, research, and practice. Although there are similarities across national boundaries, significant differences are evident that reflect unique cultural and national contexts, particularly related to sociopolitical contexts, economic resources, educational systems, and cultural traditions and values (Nilsson et al., 2007). This inclusivity has

impacted the way we approach research through the recognition and growth of indigenous theories, best practices for the development and validation of measures across national and cultural contexts (e.g., translation procedures, reliability, validity, and measurement invariance issues), and culturally-sensitive and appropriate interventions. We have seen growth in the *JVB* editorial board, which is now more diverse in terms of international members, and expertise in theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Some challenges continue to exist for non-English language scholars, such as barriers to publication and the dissemination of knowledge contained in the journal. There is a current call for manuscripts in *JVB* for a special issue on the vocational behavior of refugees. Topics might include how refugees seek employment, overcome work-related challenges, and navigate their careers.

It has been suggested that as a field we must better articulate career theories that seek to better account for dynamic, nonlinear, contextualized, and diverse work lives (Hartung, 2013). Over the past several decades, we have seen our journals increasingly reflect the diversity of our population. However, intersectional analysis of identities remains relatively limited within research on work and employment relations (McBride, Hebson, & Holgate, 2015). While the term *intersectional* was originally coined to refer to the experiences of Black women's employment experiences (Crenshaw, 1989), contemporary writings have emphasized the intersection of a broader range of identities, oppressions (e.g., ageism, class), and social groupings (e.g., sexuality, disability), yet have largely remained absent from the vocational literature (McBride et al., 2015). Challenges of integrating intersectional perspectives concern both the design and interpretation of research, including questions of whether intersectionality is a paradigm, theory, or methodological approach. Some of these questions include: Is our research sufficiently cautious in the generalizations of our findings? Are we aware of how various methodologies could open up important new lines of inquiry? (McBride et al., 2015). These questions lead to another challenge that includes, but is not limited to, the topic of intersectionality. This challenge concerns how to maintain scientific rigor while being open to the value of postmodern discourse in contemporary theory and research. (See Morrow 2005; 2007 for a discussion of trustworthiness and the rigor of qualitative research). *JVB* currently has a call for manuscripts for a special

issue on understanding the experiences, attitudes, and behaviors of sexual orientation and gender identity minority employees. Specific topics might include the following: sexual identity management at work, methodological advances in studying sexual orientation or gender identity minorities in the workplace, work-life issues, and workplace discrimination, among others.

Postmodern approaches pose challenges for vocational psychology, primarily to its core value as a science (Collin, 2007). Quoting Pepper (1942, p.161), Collin (2007), remarked that contextualism "highlights the open-ended, fluid, and tentative process of meaning-making, confounds the relationships between objectivity and subjectivity, and undermines the basis for traditional analysis." Collin also suggested that postmodern perspectives could contribute to vocational psychology by using qualitative, participative, and interpretative research methods that address issues of diversity by giving voice to those often silenced by traditional methods, attending to context with its interwoven nature and construction of meaning, emphasizing the interactive processes between people, and attending to social justice by uncovering the power and ideology that inform and shape discourses (cf. Schultheiss, 2007a; Schultheiss, 2007b). Admittedly, these postmodern approaches do not share the underlying scientific assumptions of traditional approaches long evident in vocational psychology and evident in our journals. Instead, they represent very different interpretations of work experiences (Collin, 2007). By representing a shift from what is (i.e., a commitment to objective empiricism) to what might be (i.e., a reflection of the complexity, uncertainty, and chaos evident in a postmodern world; Collin, 2007), these underlying epistemological differences are a major barrier to the acceptance of postmodern approaches by vocational psychology.

### **Opportunities for Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice**

One of the most important opportunities that integration can provide is to continue to build on the strength of *JVB* as a journal that publishes theoretically grounded research that empirically tests theories and informs practice (Fouad & Jackson, 2013). Although it is evident that the traditional and still predominant epistemological assumptions that drive current

scholarship are positivistic (Furbish & Smith, 2016), in the past decade, social constructionism, constructivism, and other postmodern perspectives have gained ground (Collin & Patton, 2009). As Furbish and Smith (2016) have argued, the dominance of positivistic research stands in contrast to the relationship between contemporary theory and practice in that contemporary careers and constructivist career counseling approaches are not based on notions of certainty and universal principles. Hence, as Furbish and Smith suggested, there remains a disconnect between emerging constructivist career theories and the predominant research methods followed in most published articles. Indeed, critical theory and critical-ideological approaches have appeared in vocational journals, yet have not gained a stronghold. New paradigms challenge traditional positivist assumptions, but also open up new horizons (Collin & Patton, 2009). Opportunities to expand beyond traditional methods may be particularly relevant as our field increasingly recognizes the diverse intersectional identities of individuals embedded within dynamic global contexts. The opportunity that an intersectional approach offers is a means of understanding the multiplicative effects within these intersections, to better avoid the erasure or conflation of intragroup differences. It also opens the possibility of accounting for voices that are both present and missing from our analyses (McBride et al., 2015).

There are many opportunities in our expanding international focus. It offers a platform for dissemination of a broad view of work lives and work contexts that can contribute to our knowledge in the field and informs our research by enhancing cross-cultural awareness and cooperation as well as the professional training of students (Nilsson et al., 2007). More globally diverse editorial boards contribute new perspectives and worldviews to their reviews, making important contributions to published research. The collective contribution of international scholars and students has fostered an interdisciplinary and international dialogue that has given rise to international research collaborations and jointly sponsored international conferences such as the NCDA-SVP-IAEVG International Symposium (Trusty & Van Esbroeck, 2009; Van Esbroeck, Schultheiss, Trusty, & Gore, 2009b), the Interdisciplinary UK Economic and Social Research Council grant funded seminar series on careers and migration (Cohen, Arnold, & O'Neill, 2011a), and the International Career Adaptability project (Leong & Walsh, 2012). Some of

these international collaborations were multidisciplinary and the focus of *JVB* special issues (Cohen et al., 2011a; Leong & Walsh, 2012). These conferences and publications reflect international dialogues that address the changing needs of workers in the dynamic global economy by disseminating knowledge and generating interdisciplinary solutions to complex global challenges. One area ripe for expansion is the study of careers beyond economically advantaged countries and explanations involving free choice (Cohen, Arnold, & O'Neill, 2011b).

Collaboration among disciplines will continue to hold great value for the generation of new knowledge to effectively address career and work concerns (cf. Van Esbroeck, Schultheiss, Trusty, & Gore, 2009a; Schultheiss & Pennington, 2009; Schultheiss & Van Esbroeck, 2009). Vocational psychology and industrial-organizational psychology benefit from each other's methods and findings, particularly within the dramatic transformation of the global workforce. Individuals' careers do not unfold independently from organizations. Instead, patterns of enablement and restraint are clearly evident as people react to organizational changes that are imposed on them and as they exercise agency over the development of their careers (Arnold & Cohen, 2013). However, despite a view of individual and organizational perspectives as conflicting with one another, evidence is accumulating that indicates that both can operate in relative harmony or cooperation (Arnold & Cohen, 2013). This perspective suggests that thoughtfully designed organizational interventions could encourage, instead of substitute for, individual action. For example, career action centers, which are set up so that individuals take responsibility for the decision to use them or not, seem to enhance a person's sense of career resilience and motivation (Arnold & Cohen, 2013; Brotheridge & Power, 2008). *JVB* has promoted an awareness of this multidisciplinary approach and will continue to do so.

Long recognized as a potentially missed opportunity for the career field, vocational psychology and organizational scholars could be encouraged to invite experts from each field to propose a special issue in which they join together to co-author manuscripts. One such example is a 2011 *JVB* special issue in which interdisciplinary teams wrote seven articles to contribute to our understanding of the complexities associated with careers and migration (Cohen et al., 2011a). This type

of collaboration could help to create a multidisciplinary dialogue grounded in the in-depth knowledge of these two perspectives. It could also take scholars across their traditional boundaries to forge new understandings of the dynamic economic global landscape to better serve individuals and society (Collin & Patton, 2009). One major challenge of accomplishing this is that these two perspectives on careers exist separately, in both their academic and applied activities (Herr, 2009). Herr (2009) suggested a way forward through collaboration, interdisciplinary research, and collaborative pursuit of related lines of inquiry to address joint issues that are problem-focused rather than discipline or theory-based. The assumption is that the disciplines working together would produce added value to both perspectives and to those who benefit from their work. This could help close the gap in perspectives in an increasingly broadened field of work in the global context (Herr, 2009) and make our work more relevant to the broader national and global population (cf. Subich, 2001).

### Recommendations for the Future

As the field moves forward, it may be important to encourage vocational and industrial-organizational psychologists to examine their basic assumptions and how they construct knowledge and to encourage them to engage in an open reflective dialogue (Collin, 2007). Together, vocational and industrial-organizational psychologists could capitalize on areas of common interest (e.g., work life concerns, equity and justice, workplace discrimination; Hesketh, 2001). It has been suggested that it is time to both continue to examine and distinguish between established approaches (e.g., lifespan development, interests, values, self-efficacy, choice, and decision making) and new responses (e.g., new constructs such as chaos, complexity and uncertainty, agentic action, story, and relationships) to a changed world (Creed & Hood, 2009; McIlveen, 2009). This would involve research that examines the applicability of existing theories to diverse populations and to those with intersectional identities. To avoid the potential for intersectional experiences to be erased in single category analysis, researchers could improve the extent to which they acknowledge what might be missing from single category analysis and why this might be the case. We can learn from other disciplines that this path forward is not an easy one. However, we can engage in debates

raised by methodological challenges associated with intersectionally sensitive approaches (McBride et al., 2015).

Research can continue to shape the formation of new integrated models for contextual understandings that are more reflective of the dynamic and contemporary world of work and the people in it (cf. Furbish & Smith, 2016). This may push researchers to examine new ways of conceptualizing the work they are doing and how to best proceed with theoretically-driven, testable hypotheses or the application of rigorous qualitative research methodologies.

As others (Duffy, 2016; Flores, 2016; Furbish & Smith, 2016; Gati, 2016) have suggested, journals might propose special issues pairing theorists and researchers with practitioners to facilitate discussion and collaboration. Joint conferences or professional meetings might cultivate this and initiate an interprofessional approach to generating and disseminating applied knowledge.

To further address the research-practice gap, perhaps we can once again borrow from science to facilitate the translation of theoretical concepts and empirical research into practical applications. A rapidly growing field called translational science has developed in response to the substantial delay and barriers between biomedical research and applications of that work to clinical practice and public health. Translation refers to the process of turning scientific observations into interventions that improve the health of individuals and the public. Translational science uses a multidisciplinary and highly collaborative approach to accelerate this transfer. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) funds this work and encourages a focus on cross-functional collaborations between researchers and clinicians. The aim is to transform the translational science process so that new treatments and interventions can be delivered faster to patients and clients (from [www.ncats.nih.gov](http://www.ncats.nih.gov)). Translational science is the field of study focused on understanding the scientific and operational principles underlying this translational process (<https://ncats.nih.gov/translation/spectrum>). The process is neither linear nor unidirectional, and each stage of the process builds on and informs the others. These innovative, educational, and training approaches are emerging as multidisciplinary doctoral programs outside of traditional

scientific fields. The goal is to effectively translate basic research into enhanced healthcare outcomes for the entire population, representing a paradigm shift in the delivery of healthcare. Although currently embedded in biomedical research, one might imagine how this model could be imported to psychology, and more specifically, to vocational psychology. The core competencies evident in doctoral psychology training programs mirror those evident in translational science programs with regard to the essential components necessary for bridging the science-practice gap. Indeed, the need for translational research has begun to be noted in contemporary writings in counseling psychology. For example, Hansen (2012) argued for the development of programs of translational research as a means of translating research into meaningful applications.

Finally, Collin and Patton (2009) noted that consideration should be given to reconceptualizing the relationship between vocational psychology and industrial-organizational perspectives by subsuming them under an overarching framework. Similarly, Van Esbroeck (2007, p. 205) argued for the need to bring the various perspectives “under the same roof” and for the home of vocational psychology to be a “house with many rooms...[transcending] the so-called borders, and that the different wings or homes could be converted to include many adjoining rooms with many doors, all under the same roof of one large house.”

A propos to this topic, this chapter ends with a quote about dreams for the future of vocational psychology, offered by Nadya Fouad (2001, p. 189) and cited in Collin’s (2009) introduction to the Collin and Patton edited book on bringing together vocational psychology and organizational perspectives:

An interdisciplinary team of vocational psychologists, sociologists, economists, and anthropologists will test newly developed theoretical constructs to explain contextual factors in vocational behavior. The *Journal of Vocational Behavior* will become the outlet of choice for all related disciplines studying the work-related behavior of individuals.

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