

Chapter 19 - Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice: Lessons Learned from the Evolution of Vocational Psychology

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A critical analysis of the history of the relationships among theory, research, and practice in vocational psychology is layered with complex influences that have been examined in depth in some illuminating contributions (O'Brien, 2001; Pope, 2015; Savickas & Baker, 2005). However, selected layers of this history have been obscured and need to be more fully explicated in order to understand the status of our field and its potential to be fully inclusive and relevant in the years to come. In this chapter, I use a historical lens coupled with a critical perspective in unpacking the relationships among theory, research, and practice in career development. Naturally, it is not possible to capture the depth and breadth of the history of our very diverse and rich field in one chapter. As such, I focus on carving out a specific niche among existing histories of vocational psychology by infusing a perspective informed by inclusiveness, social justice, and a broad, macro-level view of our discipline as the optimal lens with which to examine the history of our field. For readers interested in a more detailed analysis of the history of our field, I recommend the highly informative chapter by Savickas and Baker (2005) and a more recent chapter by Pope (2015), which I view as two authoritative accounts of the history of our field.

Goals and Assumptions

The goals of this contribution are to identify the complex nexus of relationships among theory, research, and practice that has characterized our field for over a century. To deepen our knowledge of these relationships, I propose that we expand the scope with which history is understood to encompass the macrolevel forces that have shaped our field. Many of these macrolevel forces have been identified in previous essays about the history of our field, including very thoughtful analyses of how the Industrial Revolution, the two world wars, and the growing role of technology have shaped our field (e.g., O'Brien, 2001; Pope, 2015). As I argue in this chapter, I believe our discipline was seduced by the economic boom of the post-World War II era, resulting in a more limited focus on people who had a relative degree of choice in their work lives.

As in other historical analyses, it is important to acknowledge the values and assumptions that may have shaped the discourse about the relationships among research, theory, and practice in career development. The following points highlight the assumptions that guide this particular historical analysis:

1. In my view, historical analyses are social constructions; therefore, they would benefit from using a social constructionist lens (Stead, 2013). Social constructionism is a perspective that affirms that culture, relationships, and history shape experience and knowledge. (See Stead, 2013, for an excellent overview of social constructionism within vocational psychology.) Like psychology and other social sciences, historical analyses reflect the influences of culture and relationships, which shape how we view the world and how we make meaning of our observations and inferences about life and knowledge (Gergen, 2009).
2. The values that guide my scholarship and practice revolve around expanding the range and impact of vocational psychology. As indicated at the outset, my thinking is framed by my investment in developing theories, practices, and research that will embrace all of those who work and who would like to work (Blustein, 2013).
3. As a scientist-practitioner for over three decades, my perspectives about the history of the relationships among theory, research, and practice have been influenced by my involvement in all three aspects of our field. For example, in my counseling psychology practice during the past decade or so, I have specialized in working with long-term unemployed adults. This experience has significantly affected my values and decisions about research, theory, and practice by underscoring the emotional cost that lack of decent work evokes in people, families, and communities.
4. Following the advice of MacLachlan (2014), I am adopting a macropsychological perspective in this chapter. According to MacLachlan, a macropsychological framework asks the following questions: “What sort of social systems are likely to promote a sense of worth, inclusion and participation, and how can such social systems be created and maintained?” (2014, p. 853). MacLachlan further proposed that macropsychological analyses are designed to “raise new questions about how psychology can influence rather than simply react to the settings

and conditions in which people live” (2014, p. 853).

Following these assumptions, I also believe that economic affordance and constraints have influenced individuals and, more broadly, our professional direction with respect to theory, research, and practice. One of the core positions advanced in this chapter is that economic and social forces shape our social constructions of knowledge and have impacted the direction, focus, and trajectory of our field. I believe this sort of critical analysis of historical trends is particularly needed now, given that we are observing significant growth in precarious work and increasing instability in the workplace (Blustein, 2013; Pope, 2015). Precarious work is becoming a hallmark of the current labor market; according to Standing (2014), precarious work refers to jobs that do not offer stability, fair remuneration, or a commitment to the growth and development of individual workers.

The Elephants in the Vocational Psychology Room

As reflected in existing histories of our field (e.g., O’Brien, 2001; Pope, 2015; Savickas & Baker, 2005), vocational psychology was profoundly affected by the rise of automation in the workplace, which created a vastly diverse array of jobs, many of which required more complex levels of education and training. The growth of jobs in manufacturing and industry had a substantive spillover into auxiliary fields, including education, health care, the public sector, and related fields of commerce and transportation. This boom in the numbers of occupations that existed gave rise to a growing need for people to make informed decisions about their education, training, and the course of their work lives. Other historical influences in Western nations included the expansion of education to include high schools, growing numbers of colleges (including colleges for poor and working class youth), and the involvement of nonprofits (such as the YMCA) and government agencies in the provision of vocational counseling services.

The Growth of Volition in the Marketplace

An underlying issue in the growth of the field was the vast expansion in volition for working people during extended pockets of time within the 20th century (Blustein, 2006; Duffy, Diemer, Perry, Laurenzi,

& Torrey, 2012). Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the array of options that people had in relation to their work lives was quite limited, except for people with a fair degree of social and economic privilege. However, the expansion of the labor market that arose out of the Industrial Revolution soon led to increasing levels of volition throughout many Western nations. To guide these growing numbers of decisions, the fields of vocational guidance and applied psychology evolved, generating theories, research, and practices about how to maximize the satisfaction and productivity of individuals and organizations in the career choice and development process (Pope, 2015).

Building on the Savickas and Baker (2005) and Pope (2015) contributions, my position is that we need to expand our view of historical forces to encompass overt and covert economic forces that have contributed (and continue to contribute) to the shaping of our profession, particularly in relation to access to work and career choice privilege. (Career choice privilege is defined as the having access to resources that promote 21st century education, social capital, and career opportunities, which is manifested in the capacity to make self-determined choices about how to optimally engage in marketplace and caregiving work.) In addition to the obvious social and historical forces that have shaped the theory, research, and practice nexus of our field, I propose that more covert influences have been at play and that these forces have affected how we understand target client populations and their work-based challenges and assets.

Economic Forces Shaping the World of Work

The economic forces that led to the growth in volition, which then facilitated the development of our profession, regrettably did not reach all sectors of the population equally (Blustein, 2006; Pope, 2015). Women, people of color, people with disabling conditions, and others on the social and economic margins were not always the recipients of career choice privilege (Richardson, 1993). At the outset of the development of our field, theories, research, and practices were focused on people who were beginning to experience a growing array of options about work. To respond to this need, Frank Parsons and many of his contemporaries developed models of vocational guidance that were focused on both survival and self-determination (Davis, 1969).

In the first half of the 20th century, the economy was in a great deal of flux, and the prevailing theories reflected this. Indeed, the focus on survival, which was evident in some of early person-environment (PE) fit models (Parsons, 1909), often assumed that poor and working class students and clients were not going to have much opportunity for self-determination in that their options were generally dictated by labor market conditions (Zytowski, 2001). That said, the growth of jobs in the labor market allowed many people to experience some circumscribed choices in their selection of work pathways that would enhance their capacity to survive and, for some, to create lives that were reasonably satisfying. What is interesting is the impact the Great Depression had on the emergence of a rudimentary technology in our field—codified and freely available information about occupations (Pope, 2015). During the Great Depression, the U.S. government authorized and paid for the development of the earliest vocational guidance tools, including the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*, which morphed into the O*Net nearly 70 years later. During this period, the nascent field of vocational guidance provided resources for individuals whose range of options varied considerably, encompassing people who were unemployed to students at the most privileged secondary schools and colleges in the nation (Savickas & Baker, 2005). The level of theory, research, and practice, however, was starting to tilt toward those with somewhat more options in their lives, as reflected in the emergence of a sophisticated testing culture that framed many vocational guidance practices (Pope, 2015; Reardon, 2017). While some of the tests were widely available, especially those used in personnel selection in the military, the costs of a comprehensive battery of tests became a barrier for many seeking to make their way in the world.

The Social Construction of the Post-World War II Years

Rather than review the massive changes that occurred during World War II, which have been well-documented in many thoughtful analyses of the history of our field (Pope, 2015; Savickas & Baker, 2005), I focus instead on the subtle shift that took place after the war, which I would argue transformed the discourse of our field dramatically for the half a century that followed. As we know from our history (and for some, our lived

experience), many nations in the West, especially those whose infrastructure was not dramatically affected by the war, went through substantial economic booms during the post-World War II years. The average unemployment rate in the United States during the 1950s was in the 4.5% range; however, more notably, the economy grew by 37% during that decade, often known as the decade of prosperity. (Disconcertingly, the unemployment rate for African Americans during the 1950s was approximately 10%, and, at times even higher, during the 1950s. See the following Pew Research Center report at www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/21/through-good-times-and-bad-black-unemployment-is-consistently-double-that-of-whites for more details.)

The post-World War II era within the U.S. was characterized by a growing middle-class, upward mobility, increasing access to higher education, and the growth of professions, many of which were developing hierarchical career paths, albeit primarily for those populations who already had some degree of privilege in our society (Savickas & Baker, 2005). My thesis in this chapter is that this period strongly shaped the discourse in our field about theory, research, and practice. During the 1950s and 1960s, many important theoretical advances were made, including the seminal work by Donald Super, John Holland, Anne Roe, and David Tiedeman, among others. In my view, this economic boom shaped the nature of theory, research, and practice, creating the impression that we were on our way to “the great big beautiful tomorrow” (to quote a song played at one of the exhibits of the 1964-65 World’s Fair in Queens, New York, which captured the unbridled optimism of the American dream during the post-World War II era). While the major scholars in our field no doubt had broad visions and expressed considerable interest in improving the welfare of individuals and communities, their lived experience was likely shaped by their exposure to people who seemed to be on their way up the socioeconomic ladder.

Of course, not everyone was moving up in the 1950s and 1960s. The U.S. and other Western nations still had large pockets of poverty and working people who did not have the skills or social capital to take advantage of the boom economy (Gordon, 1974; Smith, 1983). In this context, I will underscore a point that has been a consistent theme in my work: I do not believe that Super, Holland, Tiedeman, or other brilliant theorists of the

post-World War II sought to develop theories, research, and practices that would intentionally marginalize those who were left out of the boom. Rather, I believe that they were profoundly and, often unwittingly, influenced by broader macrolevel forces that created the feeling that the current reality was true for all (or most) and that the current perceived reality would continue unabated in the future.

So, what happened after our former enemies and allies built up their economic infrastructures? We then had intense competition in the global marketplace and we began to experience much more profound ruptures in the myth of unbridled economic growth. By the early to mid-1970s, the United States was starting to have unemployment rates that reached over 10% with stubborn recessions and inflation that cut into opportunities for people across the economic spectrum (Stiglitz, 2015). Moreover, the purchasing power of the wages of average Americans began to flatten and shrink as the gap grew between the haves and have-nots (Stiglitz 2015).

The economic trends since the era of prosperity have been very different than the golden post-World War II period, a point that was also made very eloquently in Pope’s (2015) chapter. However, the discourse that we have developed as a field, reifying choice, dreams, purpose, self-concept implementation, and well-being at work have remained the steady guiding posts of our practice and, to a lesser extent, our theories and research. What has happened to the focus on helping people manage short-term work-based challenges, such as layoffs and downsizing, as Brown (2017) noted in his chapter in this volume? Where is that literature coming from? How well are our theories and research informing practice for the 21st century?

Critiquing the Career Choice Privilege Discourse

The seeds of a broader and more inclusive vision for career development have always been evident but have often been on the margins of our discourse. Even in the 1970s, there were two articles that I recall reading with great interest, both appearing in the *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, which had a profound influence on me. One article by Charles Warnath (1975) was entitled “Vocational theories: Direction to nowhere,” and

another article by Steve Baumgardner (1977) entitled “Vocational planning: The great swindle.” Both articles openly questioned the prevailing focus on choice and privilege, seemingly influenced by the major economic transformations of the early to mid-1970s when the boom economy ended, leaving many people struggling for survival. In addition, our feminist colleagues bravely took on the major theories by critiquing the White male and middle-class assumptions of Holland’s theory and of Super’s life-span, life-space theory (e.g., Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). In fact, one might argue that the feminist revolution created the conceptual context that inspired Super to change his theory in 1980, providing us all with a model of how to adapt our work so that it incorporates changes in the intellectual world and socioeconomic structure.

Furthermore, scholars from the world of multicultural counseling and race and culture levied profound critiques of the prevailing discourse, led by two seminal chapters that critiqued existing taken-for-granted assumptions about the field—Edmund Gordon’s (1974) contribution to Edwin Herr’s edited volume and Elsie Smith’s (1983) profoundly wise critique in the first *Handbook of Vocational Psychology*. Soon, other scholars of race and culture, such as Janet Helms, Fred Leong, Lisa Flores, and Nadya Fouad, among others, added to these critiques and helped unpack the cultural hegemony of Western and White belief systems in the world of theory, research, and practice (e.g., Flores, 2013; Fouad & Bingham, 1995; Helms & Cook, 1999; Leong & Flores, 2015).

By the early 1990s, the assumptions and tenets that had been guiding the theory, research, and practice in our field began to feel the impact of more inclusive theories. In 1993, Mary Sue Richardson published her groundbreaking article in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* on the role of work in people’s lives. This article created a clarion call for a more intellectually diverse perspective in our field, raising questions about the prevailing notions of career choice privilege that had been evident since the post-World War II years. Richardson also identified the inherent problems in maintaining a focus on career as opposed to work, which she argued marginalized many people without access to self-determined hierarchical work lives. Richardson’s current work (2017), as exemplified by her stellar chapter in this volume, continues her creative analysis

of career development, employing a narrative-based perspective that thoughtfully integrates theory, research, and practice.

Another critical movement in the early 1990s was the publication of the monograph on the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994). This theory, which gained popularity earlier in our field by identifying the ways that sexism curtails options for women, brought contextual factors to the forefront (Lent, 2017). In addition, SCCT generated much needed research on the ways in which people who had been on the margins of our field managed the complex task of moving from a focus on survival to a focus on self-determination at work.

Moving Forward to a More Inclusive Future

Once we moved into the 21st century, a more concerted level of critique emerged in the discourse of our field. My colleagues and I explicitly sought out perspectives from liberation psychology (i.e., emancipatory communitarian perspective) to clearly critique the existing set of assumptions that still guided our practice and scholarship (Blustein, 2006; Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005). While many new efforts have been taking place in academic circles and intellectual debates in our field, a review of practice-based journals and career counseling conferences reveals that the prevailing ethos is still one of helping people to choose long-term, hierarchical careers that they will have for many years. Countering this trend are important innovations from Mark Savickas and Paul Hartung (2012) in their career construction theory, which has incorporated the notion of dynamic change into their formulations. In addition, the Florida State University team, who developed cognitive information processing (CIP) theory (Sampson, 2017; Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004), has sought to expand the focus and inclusiveness of their theoretical contributions, culminating in some innovative practice ideas that are informed by, and in turn inform, theory and research.

Despite these important initiatives, I believe that there is a disjuncture between theoretical efforts, current research trends, and work-based counseling practices. While many important critiques have been levied in our discourse, the predominant practice modalities are

still formulated based on the implicit assumptions of preparing people for the “great big beautiful tomorrow.” For example, there is little linkage between the theories we have espoused to guide career practice and the needs of practitioners working in One-Stop career centers, who are left to rely on common sense, accumulated best practices, and increasingly, scholarship from industrial/organizational psychology on best practices in job searches (Brown, 2017; Liu, Huang, & Wang, 2014). I believe that much of the discourse in our field is shaped around a belief that we are still living in the post-World War II economic boom where opportunities abound and where the notion of growth, self-determination, and purpose are the prevailing goals for practice. Moreover, I argue that this state of affairs exists because many of the newer theoretical formulations and research findings have not been well integrated into the practice community. The seeds of this synthesis, however, do exist in the literature, as indicated in the next section.

Embracing Our Past as We Move Forward

In order to move forward as a profession, I propose that we need to do a better job of embracing our past. The work by Parsons and other early leaders in our field was profoundly shaped by the economic forces of their era. Moreover, as the Western world moved into the Great Depression, career counseling practice focused on expanding resources for clients, which would allow them to maximize, as much as possible, their capacity to find stable and decent work (cf. Warnath, 1975). However, to fully move forward, we also need to embrace a wider intellectual world, one constructed of knowledge from both psychology and related social sciences.

It is common knowledge in our field that we are moving into an era of precarious work (Savickas, 2011; Standing, 2014), one resulting in the growth of contract work and less than stable employment (Katz & Krueger, 2016). I believe that the implications of this shift require radical changes in how we conceptualize the relationship among theory, research, and practice. We need to think outside of the box with respect to relevant theory; we are not economists and sociologists. However, if we do not read these bodies of work, we will be left in an intellectual vacuum, without the perspectives needed to design effective interventions for client populations. One promising way of thinking outside of the box is

to develop truly interdisciplinary theories that embrace economic factors and sociological influences. As an exemplar, I believe that the new psychology of working theory (PWT), developed by Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, and Autin (2016), offers an excellent opportunity to shape theory, research, and practice for the new era of precarious work. This theory is designed to embrace the world that we live in now—a world where work is not stable and where access to work is profoundly shaped by macrolevel forces in conjunction with individual psychological attributes.

The PWT (Duffy et al., 2016), unlike most contemporary career development theories, encompasses sociological and economic factors into an interdisciplinary perspective that seeks to explain the work behaviors of all of those who work and who want to work. With the intention of predicting work fulfillment and well-being, Duffy and his colleagues (2016) constructed a model that includes contextual factors such as economic constraints, marginalization, and economic conditions as factors that frame how people navigate work-based transitions, such as the movement from high school to postsecondary education and training. Complementing the focus on contextual factors in the PWT is a mutual focus on psychosocial factors associated with progress in education and career development, such as work volition, social support, proactive personality, and career adaptability. In addition, the theory places the concept of decent work (International Labor Organization, 2008), an aspirational framework about specific core conditions that should define the nature of work for all people around the globe (e.g., fair wages and hours, safe working conditions, access to health care, and congruent organizational values), at the center of the model. People who have access to decent work are thought to be more likely to have their core needs met by work (i.e., needs for survival, social connections, and self-determination), and optimally, more satisfying and fulfilling work lives. As research on the PWT emerges in the next few years, practice implications that link broader macrolevel factors to the individual focus that is detailed in existing career development theories will be explicated and evaluated, providing counselors and clients with new tools to navigate an increasingly complex work environment.

The PWT offers several important lessons for this historical analysis. First, the PWT builds on the earliest model of career choice theory by Parsons by

focusing on dynamic interactions between individual psychological factors and environmental affordances and barriers. Second, the PWT breaks out of the implicit pull of the post-World War II economic boom culture, which shaped so many ideas in our field. This theory, unlike many others that grew out of the belief in unbridled upward mobility, seeks to understand how barriers, economic conditions, and marginalization interface with psychological constructs to shape an individual's path toward a meaningful and decent work life. Third, the PWT offers considerable insights for practice, particularly for those who are balancing short-term needs and longer-term dreams. While practice insights emerging from the psychology of working framework have been articulated in my earlier work (Blustein, 2006), I believe that the full execution of the PWT will lead to important implications for practice for traditional career counselors, therapists providing integrative mental health and work-based interventions, practitioners working at One-Stop Career Centers, and others who are providing resources for individuals facing an increasingly unstable labor market.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to underscore the importance of not simply identifying the impact of macrolevel forces in the development of our field. Rather, I hope that the core message of this chapter will be understood as identifying how macrolevel influences shape our constructions of what is real and what is important. While I have sounded some concerns about how we develop and sustain discourses in vocational psychology, I am optimistic about the future of our field. I believe the foundations we have established have served and will continue to serve us well. However, it is now time to integrate the critiques of the post-World War II ethos that have dominated much of our practice and develop clear linkages between theory, research, and practice. There are many lessons to be learned from the history of our field; however, the core lesson I have sought to develop in this chapter is that the concerns of those on the margins of our discourse (those who have not had easy access to the great big beautiful grand career narrative) are now the mainstream. Our commitment to integrating theory, research, and practice needs to dignify and relate to the experiences and needs of people

who are increasingly struggling to gain a foothold in the marketplace.

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