

## Reinvigorating the Study of Vocational Exploration: A Framework for Research

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This article presents a conceptual infrastructure for the reinvigoration of the study of vocational exploration. We propose that perspectives derived from the ego-identity and human motivation literatures as well as an explicit consideration of relevant sociocultural and historical contexts can significantly enhance the study of exploration. By developing a framework based on these four perspectives, we describe heuristic new directions for inquiry in vocational exploration research, with a particular emphasis on the means by which individuals can internalize exploratory attitudes and activities. The article concludes with illustrative research questions derived from our review, recommendations for further inquiry, and methodological approaches that would facilitate an enhanced understanding of the vocational exploration process. © 2000 Academic Press

One of the central elements in most career-choice and development theories and in career-intervention practice is an explicit reference to the vocational exploration process (Blustein, 1997; Gottfredson, 1996; Jordaan, 1963; Krumboltz & Thoresen, 1964; Niles, Anderson, & Goodnough, 1998; Super, 1957). A key assumption of career theories is that engaging in vocational exploration fosters awareness of one's internal attributes and knowledge about one's educational and vocational options, thereby facilitating the establishment of coherent career plans and a personally meaningful work life (Blustein, 1997; Flum, 1995; Gottfredson, 1996; Holland, 1997; Jordaan, 1963; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). In fact, one of the earliest-cited statements about vocational behavior by Parsons (1909) relied on the assumption that exploration of the self and the world of work is critical in making a reasoned

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career choice. Although exploration has been viewed as an adaptive factor in the resolution of career development tasks across the life span (Blustein, 1990, 1997), efforts to understand the process of exploration have not kept pace with the rapidly shifting research needs of the information age. Given the disparity between the critical role of exploration in a wide array of developmental domains (Jordaan, 1963) and the relative lack of recent scholarship in this area, we advance a conceptual foundation that we believe can facilitate the next generation of exploration research.

## A DEFINITIONAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF CAREER EXPLORATION

In this article, we define vocational exploration broadly, including the appraisal of internal attributes (e.g., values, personality characteristics, interests, and abilities) and exploration of external options and constraints from relevant educational, vocational, and relational contexts (Blustein & Flum, 1999; Jordaan, 1963). In contrast to theoretical perspectives that have considered exploration to be a *stage* in career development (Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, & Herma, 1951; Super, 1957) or career decision making (Harren, 1979; Tiedeman & O'Hara, 1963), we view exploration as a *process* with critical lifelong and adaptive functions. Building on previous formulations (Blustein, 1997; Jordaan, 1963; Stumpf, Colarelli, & Hartman, 1983; Super, 1957), we view the process of vocational exploration as including *activities* that are directed toward enhancing self-knowledge and knowledge of one's relevant environment. Furthermore, our definition of vocational exploration includes an *attitudinal* component, which refers to one's motivation for engaging in and sustaining exploration. The definitional rubric that we propose also includes exploratory *skills* that are likely to develop as one experiences exploratory activities, which in turn promote exploratory competence. Thus, our view encompasses exploration that occurs as a result of systematic actions as well as the exploration that may result from unplanned or fortuitous life experiences.

In addition to the inner-outer dimension represented by self and environmental exploration, we have enriched the conceptual framework of our definition with a number of attributes. The process of exploration can yield two sorts of input or feedback: cognitive and affective. The cognitive aspects of exploration refer to the specific information units that individuals obtain in exploring themselves and their relevant educational, social, and occupational worlds. In addition to the information units obtained as a result of an exploratory experience, affective information also can be gleaned from the exploration process. The affective aspects denote individuals' feelings about the information and insights that are obtained in the exploration process. For example, one may learn that one enjoys being with people via various social activities, thereby identifying one's striving for and appreciation of interpersonal relationships. Similarly, the introspection of self-exploration may clarify the reasons one enjoys helping others. Exploration also may result in self-knowledge that enhances self-esteem, thereby

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