

The Developmental Perspective in Vocational Psychology

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Vocational psychology has not realized its potential as a developmental science, despite the centrality of its domain across the entire life span and its impressive accomplishments in measuring and modifying career behaviors. Moreover, rapid changes in technology and in the world of occupations have created new opportunities and new challenges. If vocational psychology is to realize its potential in this new reality, it must become a science and profession that can speak authoritatively on all substantive questions dealing with the vocational development of children, adolescents, and adults. It must also seek to integrate its research findings with those of other areas to produce a more coherent, cohesive body of knowledge that addresses every aspect of vocational development within the larger framework of life-span human development. © 2001 Academic Press

Donald Super, more than any other vocational psychologist, is associated with bringing developmental perspectives to the study of careers. In recounting the history and development of vocational psychology (Super, 1983), he was careful to differentiate vocational psychology from personnel psychology, engineering or human factors psychology, and organizational psychology. He stressed that “vocational psychology focuses on people thinking about careers, preparing for occupations, entering the world of work, pursuing and changing occupations, and leaving the world of work. . . .” He further suggested that the term *career psychology* might be used in place of *vocational psychology* “to make clear the focus on the developing person in search of and pursuing a vocation rather than on the static or (technologically) changing occupation” (Super, 1983, p. 6).

Super’s vision of vocational psychology, shaped by his being a keen observer of its emergence out of the “dustbowl empiricism” of early 20th century American psychology and by half a century of scholarship in the field, has never been matched by its reality. Although Super’s work, culminating in the career rainbow (Super, 1980), was informed by the work of early developmentalists, particularly Charlotte Buehler (1933), he acknowledged that he had not made use of most of the more recent advances in developmental psychology (Super, 1985). At the same time, Super (1983) noted that leading developmental psychologists, in their landmark volumes on life-span theory and research (Baltes & Brim, 1979; Baltes & Schaie,

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1973; Nesselroade & Baltes, 1979), seemed to be completely unaware of advances in career psychology. There seems to have been little change since then. In their expansive chapter on life-span theory in the *Handbook on Child Psychology*, Baltes and his colleagues (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998) note that there have been advances in demonstrating the usefulness of life-span approaches for "other specialties," citing, among others, an obscure article by Sterns and Dorsett (1994) that espouses the merits of viewing career development from a life-span perspective. Neither Baltes and his colleagues, nor Sterns and Dorsett seem to be aware of the rather extensive discussion of life-span developmental psychology that has taken place in vocational psychology for almost 2 decades (e.g., Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1983; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986). Life-span psychologists are certainly not alone in their apparent neglect of vocational psychology in general and Super's ideal in particular. Although Super claims that the renowned life-course sociologist Glen Elder (1968) used "Career Pattern study-derived theory," one would be hard pressed to find any reference to Super's (or any vocational psychologist's) work in any of Elder's subsequent work (e.g., Elder, 1997, 1998). The same is true of the work of most other sociologists who have written about phenomena that are central to the work of vocational psychologists (e.g., Clausen, 1972, 1993; Kohn & Schooler, 1983).

Clearly, something has happened to prevent vocational psychology from fully realizing the vision of Super and others (e.g., Crites, 1969). In the following pages, I endeavor to examine what went right and what went wrong in the field and I attempt to articulate my vision for a vocational psychology that is part of mainstream psychology while reaching out to related specialties, including the sociology of occupations and human development. In the process, I also address the thorny issue of the relationship between science and profession, research and practice. The end result, I trust, will be an informative examination of some contrasting possible futures for the field of vocational psychology.

Internal Strengths

The greatest strength of vocational psychology is that its core subject matter is of central importance in the lives of individuals in virtually all modern societies and of critical importance to the welfare of families, communities, and nations. No other discipline can make such sweeping claims. By having life-span developmental metatheory as its guiding conceptual framework, vocational psychology is well positioned to explore, investigate, and understand the antecedents, concomitants, and consequences of vocational behavior. Most essential from this perspective is the centrality of the individual in the process. Unlike occupational sociology, which sees individual behavior determined primarily by institutions and social structures, a life-span-oriented vocational psychology is able to see the individual as producer of his or her own vocational development and occupational future. This is an optimistic view, which empowers individuals to use their talent, their commitment to work, and their judgment to create the careers and the lives that they aspire to.

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