

## Dynamic Forces in the Growth and Change of Vocational Psychology

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The traditional strengths of the field of vocational psychology, that is, its theoretical and empirical traditions, are proposed to be important resources in the coming years. These strengths, if complemented by adoption of emerging theoretical perspectives (e.g., postmodern views) and research methods (e.g., qualitative methods and new statistical techniques), will allow vocational psychologists to speak to a broader and more diverse audience as well as to increase the relevance of their inquiries. In the process, I argue that the perennially problematic linkage between science and practice may be enhanced and both domains strengthened. © 2001 Academic Press

The daunting task of summarizing the status and future direction of the field of vocational psychology is also exciting. To make more manageable this analysis of the field's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, I elected to comment on only a few areas that appear to me to be striking as hallmarks of the field. Thus, this is a very personal reaction to, and projection for, the rich discipline of vocational psychology.

### *Strengths*

Reflecting on the past, two of the field's internal strengths appear to me to be its reliance on theory and its strong empirical tradition. In some areas of psychological inquiry, theory and practice are linked inconsistently to data. In vocational psychology, however, theory most often emerged from (or at times in reaction to) data. Further, theorists and their proteges (e.g., Blustein & Phillips, 1990; Gottfredson & Holland, 1990; Holland, 1959; Krumboltz, 1979; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Super, 1953) often vigorously pursued research to test their theoretical tenets. Even better, a number of major theories (e.g., Holland) were revised in response to data! Additionally, the practice of vocational psychology (and especially its assessment practices) has been investigated consistently and extensively.

Similarly, in some areas of psychology, research and practice are linked inconsistently to theory. Yet, in vocational psychology, perhaps because of the strength and varied nature of the components of its theoretical foundation, there is a strong

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tradition of pursuing research within the context of theory. Holland's (1959) personality theory of occupational choice; Super's (1953) developmental theory; and, most recently, Lent et al.'s (1994) social cognitive career theory have all generated enormous bodies of work over the years. The field's tradition of grounding research in theory has advanced theory as well as facilitated the construction of a relatively well-organized body of knowledge. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that many widely used assessment tools and counseling methods (e.g., Self-Directed Search, Strong Interest Inventory, and self-efficacy interventions) are derived from, or linked directly to, theory.

Recent publications in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* exemplify my points. For example, a special issue on careers at midlife (Stroh & Greller, 1995) includes theoretical and empirical articles which have relevance to our understanding of the aging worker. The authors draw from longstanding theoretical traditions (e.g., those of Hall, Levinson, and Super), but extend these traditions to encompass information from research in the areas of gerontology, management science, and human capital theory. The articles in the issue integrate and extend theory about this stage of career development and provide data to illustrate/test some key issues. Similarly, special issues or sections in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* on the structure of interests (Tinsley, 1996), Roe's theory (Tinsley, 1997), Holland's many contributions to the field (Savickas & Gottfredson, 1999), and person-environment fit theory (Savickas, 2000) illustrate the healthy state of theory-based research in the field of vocational psychology. In each case the editors present empirical and conceptual work that extends knowledge of a particular theoretical perspective. In so doing, they offer a summary of what has been done in the area, examples of current research, and numerous ideas for additional research and practice.

The empirical and theoretical emphases in vocational psychology also have fostered a strong tradition of methodological investigations. These investigations, in turn, feed information back into the field to support further its empirical and theoretical traditions. For example, extensive work has been conducted to evaluate various operationalizations of Holland's constructs of congruence (e.g., Lent & Lopez, 1996; Young, Tokar & Subich, 1998) and calculus (Tinsley, 1996). Such work hones the clarity of extant theory and provides guidance to subsequent researchers in the domain. Similarly, much work has addressed the reliability and validity of commonly used assessment tools (e.g., Bikos, Krieschok, & O'Brien, 1998; Gati, Osipow, Kraus, & Saka, 2000; Lindley & Borgen, 2000). This latter work contributes to both research and practice in vocational psychology.

### *Weaknesses*

The strengths discussed previously, however, may be the origin of a number of potential weaknesses of the field. Specifically, at times the focus of research in vocational psychology has turned to minutiae that may do little to advance the more general knowledge base of the field. Such work is of interest and value to those academics and researchers involved in depth studies of particular vocational theories or constructs, but often it is criticized by practitioners and trainers as straying

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