

Fostering the Scientific Practice of Vocational Psychology

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A strong measurement tradition has produced useful knowledge about individual differences in abilities, interests, personality, and work environments. Vocational psychologists apply this knowledge to assist persons develop their potential or overcome difficulties, and we assist people develop plans, make decisions, and pursue goals by employing products of research on decision making, plans, goals, and feedback. The historical strengths delivered of our research ethos are diminishing today as opinion substitutes for evidence, complex explanations are sought rather than eschewed, and postmodern confusion encroaches on vocational psychology. The Balkanization of the larger discipline contributes to this weakening. The integrity of vocational psychology is threatened by poorly trained “career professionals” and by the World Wide Web, which facilitates the delivery of career assistance without measurement or scientific foundation. Nevertheless, the field’s foothold in colleges and universities, the world’s population diversity, and the need for people to play ever more productive roles in the economy position the field to renew its momentum. In seizing these opportunities we should (a) renew our linkages with kindred fields; (b) embrace the goals of individuals, employers, and social groups; (c) restore training in psychological measurement; and (d) select and train students who will pursue science in the service of organizational goals and human welfare. © 2001 Academic Press

Vocational psychology is about the work people do, why they do what they do, how well they do it, how much they like it, whether they will keep doing it, what aggravates them about it, how successful they are, and how it fits or interferes with other things going on in their lives. It is also about the personal and environmental influences on all of these things. Vocational psychology is about the antecedents of work outcomes in genetic endowments; childhood influences, opportunities, and privations; educational experiences, effort, and attainments; decisions made; and luck. And vocational psychology is about both the antecedents and sequelae of work experiences and work outcomes in peoples’ traits or dispositions, attitudes, values, and avocational or postvocational activities. Finally, vocational psychology is about the tools and techniques used to help people navigate their education, work, and retirement.

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HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY STRENGTHS OF VOCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

The roots of vocational psychology are deep in a tradition of measuring individual differences (Dawis, 1992). The advances in knowledge that followed upon the invention of the psychological test are the fruit borne of these roots.

From research on the measurement of individual differences we have developed a rich knowledge of the structure of interests (Rounds & Day, 1999); the nature, measurement, and implications of human cognitive (Carroll, 1993) and physical (Hogan, 1991) abilities; the classification of work tasks and human performance and the ability requirements of jobs (Fleishman & Quaintance, 1984); regularities in biographical data and vocational outcomes (Stokes, Mumford, & Owens, 1994); the classification of occupations (G. D. Gottfredson & Holland, 1996); the structure of personality (Digman, 1990; Waller, 1999); and the relation of personality dimensions (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993) and other person assessments (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998) to important vocational behaviors.

We can now describe much of the complexity of human individuality using a small and robust set of dimensions characterizing interests (two dimensions defining a plane in which Holland's six interest scales may be plotted plus a status dimension orthogonal to that plane; Rounds & Day, 1999), personality (five to seven dimensions; Digman, 1990; Waller, 1999), cognitive ability (at least one dimension, Spearman, 1904; but quite a few if pertinent to the descriptive purpose, Carroll, 1993), values (three dimensions, Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), and aspirations (classified by type and level, G. D. Gottfredson & Holland, 1996; Jencks, 1979).

Labor in our empirical, measurement-based tradition—combined with the traditional scientific pursuit of simple explanations—has yielded powerful theories of work motivation, satisfaction, and performance (Locke & Latham, 1990), person–environment exchanges (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Holland, 1997), entry and persistence in organizational environments (Schneider, 1987), and other vocational outcomes (G. D. Gottfredson, 1996b). The emergence of theory and consensus about organizing structures for interests, self-ratings of skills, competencies or abilities has allowed the relatively rapid emergence of a variety of new assessment tools (Betz, Borgen, & Harmon, 1996; Campbell & Borgen, 1999; Prediger, 1999) as test developers supplement traditional interest measures with measures developed to implement social learning ideas.

Knowledge and theory derived from our roots in the measurement of individual differences not only have spawned a variety of assessment tools that help people explore educational or work alternatives, but they also have led to structures to help persons weigh alternatives by prompting them to emulate good decision makers (Janis & Mann, 1977) and to knowledge about the features of vocational interventions associated with beneficial effects (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000). A great deal of research converges in indicating the importance of plans, goals, and feedback in the achievement of desired individual outcomes (Gollwitzer, 1999), work adjustment (including motivation, satisfaction, and performance; Locke & Latham, 1990), and quality of performance of many kinds (G. D. Gottfredson,

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