



# Remembering Donald G. Paterson: Before the separation between industrial–organizational and vocational psychology

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## Abstract

This article discusses the disconnect between industrial–organizational (I–O) and vocational psychology in the context of Donald Paterson’s career, an applied psychologist who bridged both disciplines. Paterson’s interests in *both* vocational guidance and personnel selection suggest that these fields are interwoven, despite the prevailing gap separating them in science and practice. Current trends in I–O psychology are discussed that suggest the field is beginning to reconsider the importance of vocational psychology in the modern workplace. We argue that I–O psychology would benefit from such a reconnection by acknowledging its ethical responsibility to improve the workplace for both management and the worker.

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## 1. Introduction

This article uses the life and contributions of applied psychologist Donald Gildersleeve Paterson to trace the disconnect between industrial–organizational (I–O) and vocational psychology. In the early days of applied psychology, there was much shared influence between those who conducted research in what would today be called I–O psychology and

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those who conducted research in what is now referred to as vocational counseling. Paterson's research contributions largely fell in the areas of employee selection and vocational counseling. He particularly concerned himself with issues of job fit, both from the viewpoint of the organization and the job applicant. Specifically, Paterson investigated how companies could use different selection tools (e.g., ability tests, work histories) to adequately fill job vacancies. In addition, he considered the benefits of vocational guidance to the adult population (including both college students and unemployed adults) by studying how job applicants could learn to effectively align their aptitudes with their vocational interests.

We believe that his career is worth considering because his broad outlook on personnel psychology represents a view that has received less attention over time. Specifically, Paterson considered employee selection to be important both for the purposes of increasing organizational efficiency and for making sure that individuals found work that would help them best fit their capabilities and, hence, increase satisfaction. Unfortunately, since Paterson's time, there has been a disconnect between those who view selection from the organization's perspective and those who view personnel selection from the individual perspective.

## 2. The individual and organizational perspectives of employee selection

The *individual perspective* reflects a concern for the welfare of the individual employee. Typically, this perspective has been downplayed by I–O psychologists because they are employed by an organization and conditioned by its managerial values system, which emphasizes productivity and profitability (i.e., the organizational perspective) as its primary objectives, usually at the expense of a concern for an individual's goals and objectives (Lefkowitz, 2003). To this point, Savickas (2001) commented that I–O psychology's main focus has largely separated the field from vocational psychology:

The focus on individuals differentiates vocational psychology from the fields of I/O psychology, organizational behavior, and occupational sociology. Of course, vocational psychologists work in organizations, yet when they do they concentrate on individual workers and their careers rather than on the organization and its leadership (p. 168).

In practice, the individual perspective has been largely disregarded in the area of personnel selection. Rather than out of a concern for the welfare of the applicant, selection is conducted from the *organizational perspective* of maximizing economic profit and increasing efficiency. Although this is a reasonable perspective to take, the personnel selection "process would look somewhat different if the perspective of ... applicants were afforded more consideration" (Lefkowitz, 2003, p. 310). To best understand personnel selection, we believe it is important to consider both the individual and the organizational perspective. In this article, we argue that Paterson's career provides a road map for psychologists who wish to consider both perspectives.

Although there have been some notable exceptions, we argue that the organizational perspective of personnel selection is largely represented by I–O psychologists whereas vocational and counseling psychologists largely represent the individual perspective of personnel selection. Because Donald Paterson exemplified how psychologists could consider both the individual and the organizational perspectives, we believe that a review of his career and contributions may be illuminating. In this article, we highlight Paterson's

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