



The psychology of life construction

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ABSTRACT

The present article analyzes, from a historical perspective, the object of the study in the fields of vocational guidance and career management. It then considers the contemporary need to view workers as collaborators within organizations. Finally, in the third part, it presents tentative principles for the construction of a new paradigm called the psychology of life construction.

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1. Introduction

Within the context of organizations, the object of study for the field of career psychology has been the relation of individuals to the organization. Career psychology concentrates on fostering a productive and mutually beneficial relationship between employee and employer, one which will sustain the development of individuals as well the growth of the organization. In most cases this effective relationship requires a compromise between organizational strategy and the aspirations of the members who make up the organization. Career psychology studies the problems and possibilities which might arise from such a relationship individuals and organizations.

Today, career psychology views each worker as a collaborator in the organization in which he/she works. The notion of the worker as collaborator is, in fact, crucial in the field of career management because the field does not derive from a focus solely the worker or solely on the organization, but rather a concentration on the relationship which exists between them. From this perspective, career management seeks to retain the more capable workers and those who show a potential for development and adaptation to the requirements of the organization – *the high performers* as they are called in the jargon of organizations. Yet at the same time, career management aims to help those employees who do not adapt to the requirements of the organization find other types of work. This dual perspective requires that workers and the organizations collaborate.

In effect, the relationship between the worker/collaborator and the organization creates and sustains the need to develop and apply new systems of personal promotion that is, new forms of reward and recognition. In many work situations, concepts such as ‘a job for life’ or the ‘possibility of rising up the career ladder because of years of dedicated and loyal work’ are, increasingly, becoming concepts confined to history. The notion of *employment*, inherited from the industrial revolution, has become one of *employability*. The context of change in which we live today requires responses based on new competencies and, above all, on the assumption of new responsibilities to find the path to survival and satisfaction. The collaborator/worker, for example, learning how to manage his own career, while the organization, for example, must promote career development program. It would, therefore, seem to be the wise choice to strive for the development of people and their competencies, with their expected side-benefits such as the promotion of self-knowledge and self-development. In sum, it is a matter of investing in people – the patrimony inherited from the last decades of the 20th century.

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The responsibility of career management, therefore, is of necessity shared; the notions of implication and involvement are determining factors in the web of relationships between the behavior of the individual faced with the management of his/her own career, and the characteristics of the different models of career management which may offer avenues of development. However, not all organizations are prepared to respond to this alternative approach to professional (though personal) development, of its workforce. For example, there will be no participation here by those organizations of a more traditional character where the concept of 'career' goes no further than 'an increase in salary' or 'automatic promotion.' These are relics of industrialization and Taylorist procedures in the 'scientific' management of work, whose long history produced such disturbing results as those depicted by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (1936). Career management is, consequently, taken here as a process which has recourse to the contributions of different domains of *applied psychology*, integrating them in such a way as to constitute its own domain whose efficacy will be judged according to its potential to provide effective answers for individuals and organizations.

In the next part of this article, an episodic analysis is made of the development of the concept of career since its origin, and of the evolution of the importance given to people within organizational contexts. An exploration is made of the web of relationships and the ever-growing complicity which is now being established between the individual in search of personally satisfying avenues of development, and the organization which brings together a set of conditions in order to establish itself as the mobilizing agent of that search. In the last part of this article, voice is given to new conceptual adjustments. And perhaps a clue to a new paradigm. Finally, I present a challenge for the future.

1.1. Episodes of construction: From vocational psychology to career management

The psychology of Career Management, within organizational contexts, has existed since the 1960s (Hall, 1986, p. xiii) at least as a specialty having its own theoretical body, a consolidated tradition of investigation and a practice of intervention, taking on since then its own status: an *interdisciplinary* field in the study of the individual, constituting, at the same time, a *multidisciplinary* field in the understanding of organizational phenomena.

Since its origins at the beginning of the 20th century, Vocational Psychology has tried to keep up with the changes which, as a matter of history, have been occurring in the management of individuals in the context of organizations. "Vocational Psychology" which previously designated that psychology as applied to the preparation for entry into the world of permanent work, from the point of view of the worker, occupied the territory which, later, during the second half of the 20th century, would become fragmented – through the instituting of sub-disciplinary boundaries – broken up into small *habitats*, defined by dichotomies such as "research" versus "practice", "choice" versus "adjustment", "guidance" versus "selection", "differential" versus "development", "individual" versus "organizational", and "education" versus "industry" (Savickas & Baker, 2005, p. 45). These boundaries, perhaps too rigid for the type of terrain where they were being applied, eventually became a contributing factor in a certain distancing of the psychology which studies the behavior of professional choices and the respective repercussions on careers, from *other psychologies* which traditionally, had been more usually placed at the service of organizations. This has cleared the way for the emergence of a new domain: that of career management within organizations, integrated in the more inclusive area of the Psychology of Human Resources, and which has been gaining a growing visibility in organizations.

The notion of career arises at the beginning of the 20th century and burgeons into one of the most characteristic consequences of the industrial revolution and the social changes then witnessed: the proliferation and diversification of professions. This phenomenon, in turn, brought about the need to help people find and negotiate paid employment, which contributed towards the growth of explanations of behavior and performance at work, and consequently, of professional choices, especially from the 1940s onwards. So, the world of work molded and continues to mold in effect, the development of the concept of *career* circumscribed by historic conditions and the respective social, political and ethical consequences. Moreover, the concept must be seen as an integral part of the very fabric of the evolution of applied psychology, which in its turn, too, arises from the evolution of fundamental psychology, either from the theoretical or experimental point of view.

The Industrial Revolution favored the migration to urban centers of populations from rural areas, where the only sources of income were self-employment or fealty to the wealthy land-owners. This migration obliged people to adapt to new type of work, which brought as a consequence new types of jobs: factory work, sought by the migrating peasants, required, and willing accepted, a labor force that was either totally or largely untrained, but able to carry out specific, repetitive tasks, which had to be done within an agreed work timetable.

Ironically, however, the development of an industrialized economy, guided by principles of rationality, would lead to a new type of feudal system: the concentration in the world of the job market, which in its turn was the only determiner of professional choices; or, in other words, circumscribed tasks, which were transforming work into jobs and professions, disregarding life options outside this context. In this way, then, the concept of a job market was gradually evolving. In another context, however, the traditional interdependent concepts were maintained, those of master and apprentice.

The emergence of professions would come to influence, strongly, the conceptual framework and practices of Vocational Psychology. Interested in the way in which people chose their work life, and inspired by progressive ideas and by the fight for democratization and for efficient governments, the pioneer Frank Parsons understood vocational choice as a type of individual and social efficiency (Savickas & Baker, 2005, p. 24). It is within this framework that the first paradigm arises, the paradigm which would lead to Vocational Psychology being conceded the status as a science: the suitability/matching model of person/environment (Parsons, 1909). The meaning of a set of psychological variables in the choice of vocation began to be

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