

## Re-viewing scientific models of career as social constructions

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### Re-viewing scientific models of career as social constructions

In the flexible organizations and fluid societies of the 21st century, the digital revolution has changed how many people work and manage their careers. To address new and emerging needs, vocational psychologists and career counselors need to examine how they help individuals manage their work lives. This self-examination may include a “re-view” of career theory and techniques envisioned from different perspectives and elaborated from new premises. For example, the modern idea of actualizing a core self that already exists within a person served career research and practice well during the second half of the 20th century. However, for careers in the 21st century that idea might be replaced with the postmodern idea that an essential self does not exist a priori; instead, constructing a self is a life project (Savickas, in press). This constructionist view considers self to be a story, not a substance defined by a list of traits. Needless to state, self-actualization and self-construction offer fundamentally different perspectives on and prospects for career counseling.

To be clear, the constructionist ideas in this article build on and venerate the contributions of the positivist perspective exemplified by the contributions of Holland’s (1997) differential psychology and Super’s (1990) developmental psychology. Yet, they emerge from a constructionist perspective that emphasizes narrative psychology (Savickas, 2005). The traditional theories of Holland and Super are neither true nor false; rather, they substantiate a set of practices constructed to organize the work of vocational guidance and career education. Because of their significance and usefulness, these influential theories should be sustained. However, counselors must remember that the theories were constructed for use in stable societies that encouraged individuals to plan and then develop predictable career trajectories. The theories were not designed to address the career concerns of mobile workers

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in the fluid societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, counselors and researchers may better address the career concerns of workers in the boundaryless organizations of the global economy by supplementing modern concepts grounded in logical positivism with postmodern constructs grounded in social constructionism (Lock & Strong, 2010).

If social constructionism is to innovate career theory and techniques, then it must in some way be linked to current interventions so that interested practitioners may gradually make a transition to the new model with its accompanying methods and materials. When one theory succeeds another, the initial impression is that the new model contradicts the old model and eliminates it, whereas subsequent research leads to retaining more of it than was foreseen. The opposing hypotheses can later be seen not as contradictory, but as complementary (Bringuier, 1980). This means that future research may lead to a postmodern career constructionism that retains more from modern models of vocational psychology than is currently foreseen. To articulate a complementary perspective, I use social constructionism as a meta-theory with which to re-conceptualize, and thereby retain, central concepts in modern theories of vocational choice and career development. I approach this task by emphasizing the interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals make sense of their vocational behavior as well as by re-viewing traditional concepts, including vocational interests, as processes that have possibilities rather than continuing to view them as realities that predict the future.

To do this, I re-view realist categories as career constructions. In so doing, I am certain to alienate both constructionists and positivists who argue that their positions are theoretically incommensurate and, that in trying to credential both, I slight each one. Nevertheless, I have been intrigued by viewing conventions in vocational psychology's canon, including Strong's (1943) interests, Super's (1957) stages, and Holland's (1971) hexagon as social constructions rather than scientific discoveries. Because of the compartmentalization of modern and postmodern paradigms, linkages between the two are difficult to form at the philosophical level. However, at functional and pragmatic levels, bridges are emerging, especially if one concentrates on the role of language in constructing social realities.

Words are resources or tools that people use to work out matters pertaining to their social relatedness. Each discipline, including vocational psychology, has its own argot. This specialized language is a way of controlling the debate and establishing power. Definitions or dominant constructions sanction a certain representation of reality. The dominant constructions are sustained to the degree that they produce an image that the discipline on the whole finds comfortable and reassuring. The consensually-

validated meanings stabilize the field and strengthen social bonds among its adherents. The constructions themselves can become so comfortable that practitioners and researchers may become enchanted by their “truth.”

The discipline of vocational psychology and the profession of career counseling are socially constituted to produce—in the form of scientific thought—definitions that sanction a certain representation of reality, especially key aspects of vocational behavior such as interests, abilities, values, and developmental tasks. These constructs shape the questions that researchers ask and how they answer them as well as set the tasks that practitioners perform. Vocational psychologists and career counselors communicate with a shared language and agree on definitions that provide them with a cultural source of community. Within this community, social constructionists prefer a conversational epistemology that views meaning as created, retained, or modified during the course of social interaction in vocational psychology books and journals and at career counseling conferences. In these venues, career practitioners and researchers socially negotiate meaning as a way of opening new pathways along which they may advance the discipline. In this article, I want to negotiate with readers the possibility of new meanings for traditional, core concepts.

The article presents for consideration and negotiation eight examples of opening the meaning of core concepts so as to retain them for future use in career construction theory and practice (Savickas, 2002, 2005). In each instance, the concept being considered has been viewed by positivists as an entity that has been discovered and described in much the same way that an object in the natural or physical world would be discovered and described. Nevertheless, these concepts can be re-viewed from the fresh perspective of social constructionism. However, this perspective must be broad enough to still embrace and sustain the critical insights of preeminent scholars such as Strong, (1943), Holland (1959), and Super (1957) who have constructed the discipline of vocational psychology and the profession of career counseling. The field cannot afford to start afresh and thereby lose the hundred years of progress it has made. Rather than abandoning these traditional constructions, the field would do well to view their standard meaning as optional, not definitive. Current definitions of interests—such as denoting vocational interests as patterns of likes, dislikes, and indifference regarding career-relevant activities and occupations (Hansen, 1984)—should not be lost, just considered as one alternative meaning of interests. So, now onto the eight “re-views” that proffer alternative constructions for traditional concepts.

## **1. View Holland's RIASEC as a language**

Career construction theory differs from career theories that consider language as representational. Traditional career theories rest on an epistemology that asserts language represents and provides a means to express thoughts and feelings that have a prior existence. In comparison, career construction theory rests on the belief that language both constructs and constitutes social realities. Language makes the self and shapes the social world. Similar to individual people, the profession of career counseling shapes itself by the words it chooses and uses. Language partly creates the character and shapes the practices of career counseling.

Today the dominant language of career research and practice is that of Holland's (1959) making. Vocational psychologists and career counselors all speak RIASEC, and the hexagon is the field's iconic image (Holland, 1985). Holland's theory serves clients by providing them with a concise vocabulary for describing both who they are and what they are looking for. This RIASEC vocabulary enables clients to be more efficient and effective in thinking about themselves and the work world as well as more articulate in communicating their thoughts to other people. The RIASEC language provides a vocabulary for self-construction. Furthermore, the RIASEC vocabulary is an invaluable resource for articulating accounts of occupations and work life. This language prompts heuristic thinking about occupations. In short, the RIASEC language provides a vocabulary for communicating ideas about self and work.

## **2. View RIASEC vocational personality types as self-constructing types**

Each of the RIASEC personality types denotes a syndrome of traits. To the degree that career construction theory retains the idea of personality types, it refers to them as self-constructing types (Mischel & Morf, 2003). Personality refers to the consistency of the self across time. It is characterized by stable traits that are viewed as context-independent essences of people. Rather than focusing on fixed traits, career construction theory focuses on the self as a system of processes, especially processes of self-making and self-regulation. For this reason, career construction theory concentrates not on fixed personality essences but on fluid identity constructions. Traditionally, RIASEC personality types are defined by their content, including interests, competencies, and values. Nevertheless, Holland (1997) suggests that they may also be viewed as processes shaped by schemas, strategies, and beliefs. Each RIASEC type represents different sets of goals and self-theories. It is a small step to

consider RIASEC types as self-constructing types. Relative to this reconceptualization, Mischel and Morf (2003) asserted that “To the degree that individuals share similar goals, interpersonal competencies, and processing dynamics in the self-construction process, they can be studied together as constituting particular self-constructing types” (Mischel & Morf, 2003, p. 32). For example, the Investigative self-constructing type may emphasize cognitive processing dynamics, the Artistic self-constructing type may emphasize emotional processing dynamics, and the Social self-constructing type may emphasize interpersonal processing dynamics. So, while recognizing the value of viewing RIASEC types as personality styles, career construction theory views to view them as self-constructing strategies. These strategies are internalized from interpersonal experiences and cultural discourses, in other words, they are co-constructed by an individual and society.

Accordingly, this co-construction perspective asserts that a self is built from the outside in; not as personality trait theorists would have it from the inside out. As noted by Vygotsky (1978), “There is nothing in mind that is not first of all in society” (p. 142). In this regard, Holland (1997) theorized that RIASEC types develop through some of a child’s initial activities, which in turn lead to long-term interests and competencies. Holland’s hypothesis is certainly compatible with Leontiev’s (1983) theorem that the self and other psychological processes originate in activity. For Leontiev, the deed is the beginning of self and the self is a crystallization of activities. So, social and cultural activities co-construct RIASEC types.

### **3. View Holland’s Hexagon as a map**

In addition to a RIASEC vocabulary and typology, Holland’s theorizing has produced a simplifying taxonomy that serves as a source of ideas and possibilities. The hexagon provides a valuable framework for teaching clients how to organize and store information both about themselves and about the work world. However, let us not be mistaken. The hexagon does not represent the structure of occupations or the world of work itself. Instead, it represents individual perceptions of that social arrangement. The hexagon portrays the idea that socially-regulated similarities in environments produce self-constructing types, maybe with six different processing dynamics, among individuals with heterogeneous potentials. Holland’s hexagon maps cognitions that individuals use to conceptualize occupations. Research on the hexagon maps the structure of how individuals think about occupations or work activities. Factor analysis organizes themes of thinking about work, it does not uncover pre-existing

and essential interests within an individual. Thus, researchers are mapping semantic space, not conducting occupational geography.

This conceptualization of the hexagon as a tool for thinking about the world of work does not question its usefulness. Even if the hexagon was never used for interest assessment, it would remain a major contribution to vocational psychology because of its usefulness in teaching individuals how society organizes itself into macro-environments such as occupations, college majors, and leisure activities. Counselors can use Holland's hexagon as a road map to show students and clients where occupational pathways intersect as well as a travelogue that describes the types of people and situations one can meet on the different paths.

#### **4. View interest inventories as measures of resemblance**

Career construction theory explicitly asserts that interest inventories do not measure "real" essences that exist within an individual. They measure *resemblances* to socially constructed clusters of individuals; and, they have no reality or truth value outside themselves. Remember that in constructing his inventory, E. K. Strong (1943) selected the individuals who would constitute the occupational criterion groups and Holland (1959) formulated the RIASEC prototypes and described their characteristics. Ideal types are created not discovered.

Strong's inventory measures an individual's resemblance to groups of people employed in different occupations. Holland has frequently reminded practitioners that scores on the *Vocational Preference Inventory* and the *Self Directed Search* indicate degree of resemblance to each of six RIASEC prototypes. Using a vector of resemblance to each of the RIASEC types, a counselor can succinctly characterize how a client construes and interprets the world. Counselors must not interpret the scores on Strong's occupational scales and Holland's RIASEC scales as portals on a client's "real" interests. Instead they should use these scores to generate hypotheses which are viewed as possibilities not predictions.

#### **5. View interest as a relationship**

Now let us turn to interests themselves. Interests are not stable psychological traits, they are variable psychosocial tensional states. Interests denote the relationship between an individual and the environment. From Latin recall that *inter est* means

“to be between,” in this case to be between an individual and her or his social world. From this perspective, interests are re-viewed as dynamic processes not stable traits. If anything, they are a “readiness to see” that is strongly primed-- a high vigilance for opportunities and a quickness to respond to possibilities. Therefore, counselors should not privilege interests above other constructs as predictors of occupational congruence and career success. The idea of shared interest is just one among many important indicators to consider when individuals choose occupations and build their careers. Also, counselors may want to heed Kitson’s (1942) advice that they should not try to diagnose interests but rather help individuals create interests by discussing how they might use work to become more whole. Individuals can only see what they know. To create interest, counselors prompt clients to engage in exploration-in-breadth to identify potential new geographies of the self.

## **6. View career stages as a story**

Super’s (1957) model of career stages is a linguistic schema for organizing and interpreting data about work lives. The stages represent heuristic ideas and organizing principles, not predictions. The stages of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement organize predictable life events into an understandable framework. The five stages each set conditions about what to look for during phases of a work life as well as supply people with meanings that they may use to interpret their work lives. Thus, stages make an individual’s story of personal experience and private meaning comprehensible to both self and others.

Re-viewing career stages as a story has a symmetry in that they started as a story. Super adopted the five stages from the work of Charlotte Buhler (1933, 1935). As the pioneer of life-span developmental psychology, Buhler used biographies to research the life course. Along with graduate students at the University of Vienna she examined 300 published biographies and collected and studied 300 life histories recounted by elderly individuals. Her analysis of these biographies produced a normative story consisting of five life stages, which in due course Super appropriated as career stages. So, career stages are not biological schema, they are biographical thema and should be treated as such. The stages may be re-viewed as story chapters in a meta-narrative about the normative life course during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to providing a meta-narrative and commonsense framework, Super’s grand story of career synchronizes individuals to their culture by telling them in advance how their work lives should proceed and by prompting them to do what

society expects. These promptings are called vocational development tasks; they are nothing more than social expectations. However, social expectations do provide powerful anticipations that individuals incorporate as they envision life trajectories. Society demands a response to each task, with success at one task leading to the next task. The community expects people to prepare to become a worker, spend years doing productive work, and then in retirement contemplate what they have produced.

## **7. View occupations as a social activity**

Occupation is more than a set of requirements and routines, it is a social strategy by which to sustain oneself. An occupation is a means of social integration. Occupations provide socially-organized pathways for contributing to society and making a living. Occupational fields are constructs that society uses to structure and classify work activities. However, individual workers do not have occupations; they hold jobs in which they perform tasks that may not be easily or meaningfully classifiable into stable occupations. The newly emerging social arrangement of work roles is making the idea of occupation less meaningful and prompting some of our colleagues to prefer the term work activities. Many contemporary organizations mix standard jobs with non-standard assignments. Work has not disappeared, yet this “dejobbing” has affected its structure. Dejobbing shapes work as an assignment that begins as a project and ends with a product. While core workers maintain their jobs, contingent or peripheral workers move from assignment to assignment. This reorganization of work from jobs to assignments is also reshaping the meaning of career.

## **8. View career as a carrier of meaning**

Career has the modernist meaning of a series of positions that an individual occupies from school years through retirement. This meaning follows from the interpretation of the French word *carriere* to mean path. Career is thus one's path through life marked by the progressive milestones of positions occupied. However, today vocational psychologists and career counselors realize that the modern use of the word career is conflated with bureaucracy and middle class values. Fortunately, *carriere*, has a more fundamental meaning. Career, at the first instance, means carrier or vehicle. People use a career or vehicle to traverse the life course. From a social construction



perspective, career could be re-viewed, if we all agree, as the vehicle that holds and carries meaning. For career construction theory, this vehicle is a story that a people tell about their working lives. This work autobiography composes a subjective career that imposes coherence and continuity in explaining one's vocational behavior across time. A chronicle lacks this occupational plot. So one's resumé is a factual, chronological report of an objective career. While everyone possesses an objective career, a subjective career must be constructed by the individual. Individuals vary widely in how much they have elaborated their career story. Accordingly, a goal of life design counseling (Savickas et al., 2009) is to have individuals narrate and elaborate their career story as a source of biographical agency in bridging transitions between occupational positions.

## **Conclusion**

This article has re-viewed, from a social constructionist perspective, eight core concepts within the positivist tradition of vocational psychology. Rather than abandoning these traditional concepts, vocational psychology is better served by viewing their standard meaning as optional, not definitive. Hopefully, the proposed alternative and optional constructions of these concepts can advance career theory and practice in three ways. First, this re-view may sustain important ideas and evidence from the first hundred years of career theory and practice (1909-2009). Second, it may enhance communication and collaboration within the career community by avoiding the modern split of either-or-thinking and using instead the postmodern splice of both-and-thinking. Finally, the re-view may open new pathways for the important work of vocational psychology and career counseling in their second hundred years of service to society.

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### **Resumo**

Este artigo discute os conceitos fundamentais da psicologia vocacional do século xx e retoma os seus significados à luz das preocupações dos trabalhadores do século xix. Para integrar as mudanças impostas pela economia mundial, os psicólogos vocacionais e conselheiros de carreira, serão mais eficazes no apoio aos seus clientes se os prepararem para estar aptos a trabalhar (e a ter sucesso) em organizações que não se circunscrevem aos limites do mundo do trabalho tal como este era concebido no século transacto. Para tal, propõe-se que se suplementem os conceitos prevaletentes, sustentadas pelo positivismo lógico, com constructos pós-modernos baseados no construcionismo social.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Interesses, Construcionismo social, Estádios de carreira, Psicologia vocacional, Dejjobing

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the core concepts used in the science of vocational psychology during the 20th century and re-views their meaning relative to the career concerns of workers in the 21st century. Vocational psychologists and career counselors may better assist individuals prepare for and succeed in the boundaryless organizations of the global economy if they supplement the meaning of modern concepts grounded in logical positivism with postmodern constructs grounded in social constructionism.

**KEY-WORDS:** Interests, Social constructionism, Career stages, Vocational psychology, Dejjobing