Introduction: Innovating Career Development Using Advances in Life Course and Life-Span Theory

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Commenting on the future of vocational psychology in the next decade, Savickas (2001, p. 284) noted that its mission should, among other things, concentrate on “advancing scientific understanding of vocational behavior.” We also view this as a defining mission for vocational psychology. Consequently, we organized a symposium at the American Psychological Association Convention in Washington, D.C. in 2000 (Hartung & Vondracek, 2000) and invited some of the leading researchers in vocational psychology and related areas to demonstrate how advances in life course and life-span theory could “innovate” career development theory, research, and practice. The present special issue of the Journal of Vocational Behavior evolved from that symposium. It contains all of the papers presented at the symposium (most of them significantly expanded and updated), as well as two additional invited papers prepared by research teams led by scientists with a long tradition of research in life course studies in career development, namely, Phyllis Moen from Cornell University’s Careers Institute and Jeylan Mortimer from the University of Minnesota’s Youth Development Study.

The basic, underlying premise of the symposium was that the 21st century would pose many new challenges to vocational psychology, which will necessitate the development of new models, new research paradigms, new research methods, and new methods of intervention. Two core social science disciplines, psychology and sociology, were seen as essential contributors to innovation in the new vocational science. Within these disciplines, two orientations share an attribute that must be a signature feature of 21st-century thinking about vocational development, namely, an explicit focus on all age groups. In psychology, this orientation is known as a life-span emphasis, while in sociology it is known as a life course framework. These perspectives underscore the fact that scientific understanding of vocational
behavior (or any behavior) cannot advance significantly if the study of such behavior is (largely) confined to examining its manifestations or expressions during only one particular period of life. For example, the childhood antecedents of later vocational behaviors must be much better understood (Vondracek, 2001a), not just in relation to career outcomes, but also in relation to their broader impact on psychological adjustment and the quality of life (see, for example, Vaillant & Vaillant, 1981). At the other end of the life span, careers no longer have predetermined endpoints. Yet, too little is known about extended careers, serial careers, and other career patterns that are emerging as a consequence of the dynamic and rapidly changing social and cultural environment that has been the principal focus of life course sociologists.

Of particular interest is that both life-span psychology and life course sociology have moved toward more complex, more inclusive, more dynamic models that are better able to represent the 21st-century realities of an apparently constantly accelerating rate of change in virtually all contexts of human development. Specifically, life-span psychologists have moved from unilinear, organismic, and deterministic theoretical formulations toward models better able to capture the contextual, adaptive, probabilistic, and self-organizational dynamic nature of development (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998). At the same time, life course sociologists have proposed models to better account for the “multiple, interlocking interfaces between men and women and work and family over time (Han & Moen, 1999, p. 101). Thus, it is not surprising that a number of papers in this special issue (e.g., Savickas; Shanahan & Porfeli; Vondracek & Porfeli) focus particular attention on the merit of using comprehensive developmental frameworks in the study of vocational behavior. Moreover, attention is directed away from theoretical differences and distinctions and toward consideration of how the joint consideration of life-span and life course propositions could significantly expand the conceptual models used to frame research questions about vocational behavior and career development.

In the first paper, Savickas challenges the assumption that those claiming to do career development research are necessarily using a developmental paradigm. He notes that the majority of career development research actually uses cross-sectional designs that make it very difficult to discover central aspects of any developmental process. The remedy, according to Savickas, is for researchers who are interested in studying career development to focus on development first and on careers second, to use more longitudinal research designs, and to recognize the importance of context and relationships in development. If career development researchers examine how people fit work into their lives rather than how to fit people into occupations, Savickas believes that career practitioners will shift their attention from promoting career development to fostering individual development through work and relationships. The clear implication is that these innovative changes in the field of career development would help to move the field forward and restore its connection to mainstream orientations in the behavioral sciences.

The second paper, by Vondracek and Porfeli, takes aim at the unnecessary emphasis on differences between life-span and life course orientations to the study
of human (and career) development. The life course approach is usually associated with the discipline of sociology and with a focus on the whole person, while the life-span approach is associated with psychology and with a focus on categories of behavior (i.e., functions). Nevertheless, the two approaches are shown to have common features that are much more central than are their differences. Indeed, there is evidence that the two approaches are actually converging both in terms of theoretical formulations and in the use of the research methodologies they use. If these trends persist, the application of an integrated life-span–life course theoretical model to the study of career development, accompanied by the simultaneous use of methodologies that can examine important variables as well as “whole persons,” could be just the innovation that is needed to advance the field significantly beyond its current status.

In the third paper, Shanahan and Porfeli focus on the fact that the life-span and life course approaches, in spite of many similarities, have diverged in the phenomena that they attempt to explain. As a consequence, they start by asking distinctly different kinds of questions, which lead to distinct “points of entry” in the process of research. In the interest of integrating the life course and life-span approaches, they argue that a strategy employing dual points of entry, one reflecting a focus on psychological functions and the other a focus on roles and context, would be one way to proceed. Specifically, they suggest that our understanding of career development can be enhanced if we appreciate the increasing individualization of the life course, which incorporates new (as well as old) pathways to adulthood, and novel role configurations and pathways from school to work. Control theory (Heckhausen and Schulz, 1995) is presented as a means to examine psychological functions as well as social contexts and roles in the transition to adulthood and the world of work.

The following two papers represent specific examples of the application of methodological and theoretical advances that expand and innovate career development research and practice. They underscore the long-standing tradition in vocational psychology of integrating theoretical advances and research findings into applications that enhance the quality of human development and within it, the quality of work and careers. First, Richardson, relying on Lewis’ (1997) conceptualization of contextualism, proposes that counselors enhance their focus on the “present moment,” the current life circumstances of their clients, and abandon what she perceives as an overemphasis on the limiting effects of early life experiences and parental power. Concurrently, she proposes that counselors relinquish the distinction between what constitutes normal development and what does not, along with the a priori specification of the nature of developmental tasks and goals. Richardson concludes by showing how contemporary changes in the world of work, on the one hand, and the increasing variability in individuals’ personal lives, on the other, make contextualism particularly relevant for counselors in general and for career counselors in particular. A by-product of adopting such a contextualist perspective is a greatly expanded view of career psychology, one that focuses on the generic goal of effective functioning in all domains of the person’s life.
Expanding the life domains considered within career psychology is also an objective pursued by Hartung in his paper. Specifically, he proposes that the developmental paradigm in career psychology should be expanded by prominently including consideration of the reciprocal relationship between work and play (leisure). Hartung stresses the view that play should be conceptualized as a universal human activity that cuts across cultural and socioeconomic boundaries and one that contributes to positive development or to leading a “full life.” He presents empirical evidence to support his belief that both theory and practice in career psychology could benefit from a fusion of work and play. Such a fusion would expand the developmental paradigm of career psychology, incorporating the entire life span and life space.

The final two papers represent empirical studies that use expanded conceptual frameworks to examine career decision making (Mortimer et al.) and dual careers (Moen & Sweet) in the new era of technology and rapid changes in occupations, social institutions, and developmental pathways. Mortimer and her collaborators draw from interviews of adolescents engaged in the transition from school to work to identify themes that are often neglected in the study of vocational decision making. They note, in particular, that for many adolescents occupational commitment is postponed, marriage is delayed, schooling is extended into the third decade of life, and a return to the parental home and continued economic dependence on parents are not at all unusual. Although these patterns may be common for college-bound youth, it is far from clear how non-college-bound youths fare in view of the social and economic conditions that have produced this generally delayed pattern for their college-bound peers. Moreover, Mortimer, et al. point out that little is known about how contemporary young people feel about finding their way in the new economy. One interesting finding they report is that family, friends, and significant others are mentioned by many youths as important in their career development, while guidance counselors are rarely mentioned. Changing and enhancing institutional supports for young people who are engaged in the increasingly lengthy process of developing a vocational identity is recommended on the basis of the findings.

In the final paper, Moen and Sweet propose that the changed circumstances of the contemporary workplace require an expansion of the developmental paradigm in career development research from analysis of the career paths of individuals to a life course approach that focuses on the interlocking career paths of couples. Their data, collected from couples working for the same company, offered evidence in support of the life course theme of linked lives and confirmed the overlapping nature of work and family life for these couples, with no clear demarcation between men’s and women’s spheres. The clear implication of the work presented by Moen and Sweet is that the developmental paradigm of career research must move from an individual path to an interlocked path model in order to accommodate the heterogeneity of experiences that shape the career development of each spouse in two-earner couples. To close the Special Issue, we invited Lenore Harmon, a past editor of the Journal of Vocational Behavior, to comment on the articles of the Special Issue.
Collectively, the papers of the Special Issue demonstrate that innovation is alive and well in the field of career development. Moreover, they represent examples of how innovation cuts across theory, research, and practice. Although a special emphasis was placed on the contributions of life-span developmental psychology and life course sociology in the present Special Issue, the various contributions underscore the fact that this emphasis was not meant to be exclusive. Indeed, calls for a broadening of the conceptual, as well as the disciplinary, base of vocational psychology have been issued by leading vocational psychologists with considerable regularity. For example, Blustein (2001) has eloquently stated that vocational psychology should extend its reach by articulating a “psychology of working” that is more inclusive with respect to its demographic scope, conceptual foundation, research methods, and policy and practice agendas. Similar messages have recently been issued by Gottfredson (2001), who urged renewed and strengthened linkages with kindred fields, such as organizational—industrial psychology, and by Lent (2001), who decried that vocational psychology is giving too little attention to contextual and cultural variables.

We hope that the present Special Issue will make a small contribution toward broadening the reach of vocational psychology across several dimensions. Rapid changes in technology and the globalization of economies have changed the world of work dramatically, necessitating new, more inclusive, and less parochial approaches in vocational psychology. If vocational psychologists accept the challenge and vigorously pursue these calls for more inclusive, integrative, and innovative theory, research, and practice, they will “earn the right to speak authoritatively on all substantive questions dealing with the vocational development of children, adolescents, and adults” (Vondracek, 2001b, p. 258).

REFERENCES


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