

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A Convergence Project for Career Psychology

Mark L. Savickas
Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine

Robert W. Lent
Michigan State University

THEORISTS AND RESEARCHERS in diverse psychological specialties have increasingly been lending their voices to the call for unified science. Noting the array of competing theories of psychotherapy, Goldfried and Padawer (1982) asserted that theoretical diversity may be taken as a sign of the field's healthy development, but concluded that "there nonetheless comes a time when one needs to question where fruitful diversity ends and where chaos begins" (p. 3). Staats (1991) raised strong concern about the fragmentation of modern psychology, arguing that psychological science is facing a crisis of disunity, reflected by "many unrelated methods, findings, problems, theoretical languages, schismatic issues, and philosophical positions" (p. 899). Efforts to address questions about fragmentation within the psychological sciences have produced a robust movement called *unification psychology*. This movement has been particularly animated in the field of psychotherapy, where its aim has been to integrate or bridge the many competing theoretical approaches to comprehending and conducting psychotherapeutic interventions.

The domain of career psychology, like psychotherapy, is characterized by a plethora of theories, philosophical positions, and research camps (although not nearly as profuse or diverse as those found in psychotherapy). However, calls for unification of career theories and research have been relatively faint. Career

psychologists have never endured the sort of disharmony that currently besets certain other psychological disciplines. We have been able to coexist more or less peacefully, possibly because of our roots in the study of individual differences or because our theories deal with different but overlapping problems. Nevertheless, like their peers in other psychological domains, career psychologists are becoming increasingly sensitized to the value of scientific rapprochement. Krumboltz and Nichols (1990), for example, recently compared three theories of career decision making to Krumboltz's social learning theory, then integrated the different theories using Ford's (1987) overarching conceptual model, the living systems framework.

Sensitivity to convergence in career theories seems to have been heightened by a series of invited articles celebrating the 20th anniversary of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. These articles prompted scholarly reflection concerning the course that career psychology had traversed since the journal's founding in 1970. The first contribution was written by Samuel Osipow (1990). Osipow's article directed our attention to the topic of convergence in theories of career choice and development, tracing how such theories have shaped vocational research and counseling practice for more than 40 years. He identified a group of four theories that spanned this era and remain influential today: trait and factor (Holland, 1985), social learning (Mitchell, Jones, & Krumboltz, 1979), developmental (Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, & Jordaan, 1963), and work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). Osipow asserted that these four theories have come to resemble each other in important ways. By identifying significant convergence in these theories, Osipow roused his colleagues' interest in theory integration (e.g., see the invited contribution by Borgen, 1991).

Joining Osipow in this concern with convergence, Donald Super proposed that a conference be convened to explore in greater depth the prospects for further theory convergence. Super (1992) had recently written how the question of "which theory is better" is specious because no theory in itself is sufficient. The theories need each other to comprehensively address the complexity of career development. Furthermore, the results of research studies acquire deeper meaning when they are viewed from the perspectives of two or more theories.

Super's idea for a convergence project received an enthusiastic welcome, perhaps because of growing concerns about disunity fueled by other invited articles in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, such as a review article by Hackett, Lent, and Greenhaus (1991). In reflecting upon 20 years of theoretical and empirical activity in career psychology, Hackett and her colleagues suggested that the time is ripe for integrative efforts that will

- (a) bring together conceptually related constructs (e.g., self-concept, self-efficacy); (b) more fully explain outcomes that are common to a number of career theories (e.g., satisfaction, stability); (c) account for the relations among seemingly diverse constructs (e.g., interests, needs, ability, self-efficacy); and (d) identify the major variables crucial to an overarching theory of career development. (p. 28)

A number of recent reviews note the proliferation of vocational constructs that are incompletely incorporated into existing theory and research. Careful examination of the operational definitions of many of the new constructs reveals great similarity to the operational definitions of existing constructs. Because many new constructs are not explicitly linked to career theories (although they may have connections to theory in developmental, organizational, social, or personality psychology), their relation to existing career constructs is often elusive. Although novel constructs can expand the scope of career inquiry, a comprehensive understanding of vocational behavior will require concerted efforts to (a) identify core constructs that cut across major theories, (b) agree upon operational definitions for these constructs, and (c) develop and disseminate a research agenda for theory integration.

THE CAREER CONVERGENCE PROJECT

We developed a convergence project to address these issues. The project sought to facilitate theory convergence, stimulate theory unification research, and prompt more explicit use of theory in guiding vocational research. To accomplish these goals, we enlisted the help of a group of preeminent scholars who were eager to discuss the topic of theoretical convergence. This group of distinguished colleagues agreed to participate in a conference that would consider prospects for convergence among theories of career choice and development. They also agreed to expand their presentations into chapters discussing their view on a convergence agenda for career theory. These chapters compose this book.

The book has four parts. Part 1 consists of five chapters in which major career theorists each consider how their approach converges with, or could be made to bridge, one or more other career theories. The career theorists included in part 1 represent the five theories that currently serve as the foundation for the field of career development and counseling: John D. Krumboltz, René V. Dawis, John L. Holland, Edward S. Bordin, and Donald E. Super. The theorists have made important, long-lasting contributions to career psychology, and all have received major awards from professional organizations recognizing their contributions.

In preparing their chapters, we asked the theorists to address the following question: "How does your theory converge with one or more other career theories?" We urged them to go beyond surface similarities and cite aspects of their theories that significantly converge with or complement other career theories. We also encouraged them to consider areas for potential convergence and to identify innovative constructs or frameworks from other areas of psychology that might be used to bridge the various career theories. In short, we asked the theorists themselves to write chapters that discuss how their theories intersect, complement, or supplement one another.

In part 2, the attention shifts from conceptual to empirical convergence. In particular, we selected core constructs in the career literature that may offer the potential to bridge the theories. We then invited prominent researchers in vocational psychology to consider how these theoretical constructs and their accompanying empirical literature could be used to converge career theories and unify vocational research. The researchers—Robert W. Lent and Gail Hackett, Louise F. Fitzgerald and Nancy E. Betz, Arnold R. Spokane, David L. Blustein, and Susan D. Phillips—were selected because of their inquiry and writing on the variables considered to be potential *unification constructs*.

In preparing their chapters, we asked them to address the following question: “How can these constructs serve as a fulcrum for theory integration?” We encouraged them to consider how, conceptually and empirically, a particular construct or set of constructs (a) crosses two or more theories and (b) can be used to bridge existing theories.

In part 3, the focus turns from convergence rooted in research to practitioners’ views on theory convergence. Specifically, at the conference that preceded this book, we convened work groups that responded to the agenda suggested by the panel of career theorists and researchers. These work groups were composed largely of career practitioners facilitated by teams of distinguished career scientist-practitioners. The aim of these groups was (a) to react to the papers presented during the conference and (b) to suggest novel perspectives on and ideas for convergence in career theories. The five work groups corresponded with the five theories represented in part 1 of this book. The discussion leaders—Linda Mezyddlo Subich and Karen M. Taylor, James Rounds and Beryl Hesketh, W. Bruce Walsh and Judy M. Chartrand, Steven D. Brown and C. Edward Watkins, Jr., and Fred W. Vondracek and Nadya A. Fouad—were selected to represent the diversity of scholars involved in theory construction and research in career psychology.

In preparing their chapters, we asked these respected colleagues to address the following question: “What views did practitioners express during your discussion about theory convergence and its relevance to practice?” In addition to summarizing the practitioners’ real-world concerns about theory convergence, the chapter authors were encouraged to share their own views on theory convergence.

In part 4, three discussants—Samuel H. Osipow, Lenore W. Harmon, and Mark L. Savickas—each reflect on the ideas presented during the convergence conference and in the foregoing three sections of this book. They were selected to represent the vantage points of theory, research, and practice, and were asked to form conclusions about the potential outcomes of the convergence project. In particular, the discussants were invited to consider how the chapter authors defined the problems thwarting theoretical convergence, the possibilities for resolving these problems, and areas in which the authors agreed and disagreed. The discussants were also asked to share their own views on the problems and possibilities for integrating career choice and development theories, and to identify future directions.

CAVEATS

The convergence project did not advocate the creation of a single, monolithic theoretical approach to career psychology. Historians and philosophers of science have shown that science is well served by a diversity of viewpoints rather than a monopolistic paradigm. Neither did the project advocate a “theory-building by consensus or committee” approach. Rather, keeping with the unification zeitgeist in psychology, the project merely sought to nurture consideration of cross-theoretical linkages in the career literature. Specifically, it aimed to examine converging themes among major career theories, to consider the maintenance of important and useful distinctive features and applications of each theory, and to convey the importance of an agenda for future research on theory integration.

CONCLUSION

We view this book as an initial step toward promoting a more unified scientific base for career psychology. Although career psychology has enjoyed a vigorous renaissance and important advances in recent years, this book represents the first attempt to foster rapprochement among career theories. Given the recognition that unification efforts are receiving in the larger psychological arena, we see this as an excellent time to examine the prospects that convergence holds for theories of career choice and development.

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