

Everything You Need To Know About Career Development You Already Know

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Before we begin, we want you to dig deeply into your own career and focus on your feelings about it.

No, no, not like that—we mean dig really deeply, beyond the superficial reasons and into those early dreams, hopes, and aspirations.

That's right, look way down there, where all of those private feelings lie, feelings about what you wanted to do and what you've actually done with your life. These are feelings that you probably do not share with your closest friends or with your parents or with anyone for that matter.

All that you need to know to understand a student or an advisee is embedded in those personal experiences you probably acknowledge only rarely.

In the nearly 100 years since a visionary social reformer in Boston named Frank Parsons wrote the first recognizable career counseling book (Parsons, 1909), research, theory, and practice in career development have advanced beyond Parsons' wildest dreams. Tens of millions of people have completed interest inventories; there are thousands of trained professionals practicing in career specialties; and libraries are filled with books and journals on career choice and development. Indeed, reviews of the voluminous literature suggest that career development may be the most vital, if not the most mature, of the specialties in the counseling field (Borgen, 1991; Gelso & Fassinger, 1990; Gelso & Fretz, 1992).

How, then, can we contend that most of what you need to know you already have access to internally? The answer is that a few pervasive struggles repeatedly emerge as central issues in career development, and those struggles are the ones that each of us has probably faced personally. These struggles are with the limits placed upon our hopes, dreams, and aspirations by a society in which there are structural limits to the number of individuals who can enter a given occupation. Our intention is to illustrate those concerns that most people have about their careers and then to briefly discuss contemporary research and theory and, where possible, offer an illustrative practical example.

Career Aspirations and Events That Shape Them

Almost all individuals hold, at some time in their lives, a form of personal career aspiration. By aspiration we mean an interest in or affinity toward a particular career field, though not necessarily the confidence nor the wherewithal to implement that aspiration. These early hopes and dreams are a product of one's socioeconomic circumstances and learning history and are affected by gender and personality. When you examine your personal circumstances, you can probably identify your own early aspirations.

It is increasingly apparent that occupational aspirations are universally held—almost all people have them. For example, a recent article by Arbona and Novy (1991) reported virtually identical initial occupational aspirations among Black, Hispanic and White adolescents. Others have found similar aspirational patterns among male and female adolescents. Even though early aspirations may be similar among social groups, the resources and opportunities needed to implement these aspirations differ sharply across groups. What we are beginning to understand is that different, and in many cases more powerful, barriers present themselves to women and minorities than to other social groups (Carter & Cook, 1992; Gottfredson, 1986; Spokane & Hawks, 1990). The probability of implementing an aspiration is, then, less for some social groups than for others. Furthermore, the existence of social barriers to implementation is recognized early and reduces the aspirational levels of affected groups during adolescence.

Although aspirations have their origins in temperament, physiology, learning experiences (Krumboltz, 1976), personality (Holland, 1985a), gender socialization (Gottfredson, 1981), cognition and emotions, they are private in nature (Krumboltz, 1983). These aspirations develop over time—more rapidly during adolescence, less so in adulthood—and stabilize to a remarkable degree by age 30 (Gottfredson & Becker, 1981).

Career Development Theory

Search Model

There are several plausible explanations or models for the conversion of career aspirations into actual careers. Two of these models, the search model and the compromise model, have come to dominate thinking about career development.

The first explanation—that individuals search for a career option that represents a reasonable fit with their personal qualities—was the one offered by Parsons in 1909. This model has undergone significant transformation, largely at the hand of John L. Holland (1985a), whose version of the model has very wide popular and professional support. The search model presumes that a relatively stable personality disposition develops early in life, which then directs the individual's search for a career that will suit and enhance that disposition (Holland).

Support for these versions of the search model can be found in convincing studies demonstrating high levels of stability over time of measured occupational interests (Borgen, 1986; Rounds & Tracey, 1990). If such scores are highly stable, then it is more likely that individuals will change or leave jobs that are incongruent with their personalities as opposed to changing themselves in any significant way. Thus, Prestholdt, Lane, and Matthews (1987) recently concluded that it was quite reasonable for nurses who were dissatisfied with their careers to leave nursing in search of more congruent careers.

Adherents of the search model suggest that the selection of a career is a relatively straightforward process that results in a career choice that is a reasonable fit with one's personal characteristics.

Some of you who are reading this portion of the article will readily be able to identify the personal qualities and characteristics that led you to a job involving academic advising. Research tells us that about half of you are the kind of person that others naturally gravitate to for advice and support. According to the search model, you will see as quite natural your ability to carry on a meaningful conversation with others. Others of you probably feel incongruent and may even be exploring alternate careers involving business or the arts. The odds are that any switch you make will be to a career that is more congruent with your personality and less social in nature. According to the search model,

you will not need to change yourself much to accomplish this transition.

Compromise Model

Most compromise theorists argue that the portion of the human experience that changes and develops over time is more crucial than the portion that remains stable (Ginzberg, 1984; Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990; Schlossberg, 1983; Tiedeman & O'Hara, 1963). Thus individuals continuously change over time by repeatedly having to compromise their aspirations because of barriers imposed by realities of the labor force and then having to integrate these compromises into a developing self- or ego identity (Gottfredson, 1981; Super, 1957; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986).

Support for the developmental or compromise position comes from extensive longitudinal studies of career development (Super and Overstreet, 1960; Gribbons & Lohnes, 1982) that document a series of stages through which career development progresses in adolescence and into adulthood.

Those of you who can readily identify a compromise you have had to make, and we mean a real compromise, will easily understand what it means to be forced to integrate a failure experience and subsequently to forge revised aspirations. The process is painful and usually very private, and the explanation one offers publicly may have little relation to the underlying struggle. The resulting revision in aspirations, however, may be quite positive and is just as likely, if not more likely, to result in a powerful and successful career outcome as was the original aspiration.

Considerable research now suggests that people vary widely in their ability to persist in a task and in their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to compromise situations (Spokane, 1991, 1992). One particularly clear study documents the shift from scientific to nonscientific careers that occurs when college students are faced with mathematics and science course barriers (Astin & Panos, 1969). Although we once thought that most individuals would consider a backup career in the same field but at a slightly different prestige level (e.g., a student who was unable to enter medical school might consider medical technology), it is now increasingly clear that individuals will change fields altogether to preserve the prestige level of the occupation they are considering (e.g., the student who is

unable to enter medical school switches to law school) (Gottfredson, 1981).

The two models of career development, *search* and *compromise*, offer explanations of the career development process that differ in the extent to which personal change versus job change is stressed. In the face of reality barriers some individuals will simply switch to a different and more congruent job, whereas others will adapt internally, integrating the experience to result in a change in the self.

Implications of the Search and Compromise Models

What do these models mean for the student in front of you? You should anticipate the following:

1. Most adolescents will hold aspirations different from the careers they will eventually implement. There are exceptions, of course, and some individuals **will** aspire to and easily implement clearly articulated careers.

2. The search or compromise experience may be confusing, painful, and exciting, all at the same time. Anxiety is a natural concomitant of career decision-making. If anxiety levels are too high, career decisions will be more difficult. A complete lack of anxiety, however, may result in inaction.

3. One particularly difficult course (e.g., comparative anatomy, calculus, thermodynamics, or student teaching) will often trigger the compromise situation. The student should understand what a compromise means and what consequences the compromise will have. A detailed discussion may be necessary.

Career Decision Process

Several psychological processes occur during a career decision that bear directly on the student's and consequently the advisor's experience. Although extensive research literatures exist on each of these topics, only brief mention will be made here.

Gender and Career Decisions

Year after year, the career development of women is the most studied topic in vocational behavior. Although this literature is large and difficult to summarize, several themes are beginning to emerge:

1. For many women and an increasing number of men, a career decision is a difficult

lifestyle decision involving tradeoffs between career aspirations and marital and family plans. This means considering more factors than would otherwise be the case, and it means weighing external factors more heavily.

2. Many women, as well as many members of minority groups, will restrict the range of occupations they are considering, usually by considering more Social and Artistic occupations and fewer Investigative and Realistic occupations (using Holland's system, 1985a).

3. The likelihood of implementing an early aspiration is less for women and for minority groups, due largely to external barriers and circumstances such as child-rearing responsibilities.

4. The stress levels of women and minority individuals and their families will be greater than those of other social groups.

Anxiety and Career Decisions

Anxiety plays a role in most career decisions. This is not necessarily bad, unless the anxiety reaches high levels. At lower levels anxiety is natural and probably has motivational benefits. At higher levels, however, anxiety can contribute to indecision (Fuqua, Seaworth, & Newman, 1987). Anxiety management is an important part of any career decision.

Self-Efficacy and Career Decisions

This new area of research seeks to understand the psychological processes involved when an individual concludes that she or he can or cannot succeed in an occupation or even in an occupational task. There is evidence that low self-efficacy is related to avoidance of math and science occupations (Betz & Hackett, 1987) even when the individual has the requisite skills to succeed (Osipow & Rooney, 1990).

Intervening in Career Development

More than 50 years' worth of research on career counseling has uncovered five basic ingredients for successful intervention (Holland, Magoon, & Spokane, 1981). These ingredients are:

1. *Cognitive Rehearsal of Occupational Aspirations*
This means that an individual talks about, writes about, or even thinks about what career she or he desires. Rehearsal of this kind apparently helps to clarify aspirations. Most people, in the face of a difficult career decision, avoid such

thinking, so any increase in rehearsal will be beneficial. Encouraging a student to keep a journal, to talk to friends about who they want to be, or to engage in fantasy thinking is a potentially helpful strategy.

2. Social Support From Friends, Advisors, Counselors, or Instructors Such support relieves anxiety and gives the sense that one is not alone in the career choice. Social support from a parent may be especially helpful, for research tells us that parents are usually the most important source of career support, and if a negative relationship exists, career anxiety may result (Otto, 1984; Spokane, Spokane, & Bernstein, in press). Encourage a student to seek out multiple sources of social support.

3. Information About Self and the World of Work The complex process whereby an individual filters and assimilates information about self-characteristics and about the nature of the world of work is an area of vocational behavior that has made steady strides. Where we once believed that the simple presentation of information to an advisee would be beneficial, we now know that the reception and integration of such information involves a complex process of environmental scanning and a series of cognitive steps that result in the rejecting of some information and the selective integration of the remainder of information.

The student in front of you will likely reject any information that is inconsistent with her or his preconceived notion about a fitting career. Thus, it may be necessary to persuade that individual to consider disconfirming information as well as supportive information. Career exploration generally begins with a sweeping superficial review of a large number of occupations and is then followed by a more intensive review of a few possibilities (Gati & Tikotzki, 1989). People are more willing to consider information that comes from a valued role model (Thoresen & Krumboltz, 1968).

Finally, occupations have protective layers or barriers surrounding them to limit access to information critical to entry. Although most career counselors can know some information about occupations, it is a far better strategy to encourage the advisee to penetrate the stream of information surrounding an occupation than to present that information to the advisee directly. Gaining entry into this stream of critical information requires persistent attempts and some resistance to failure. Thus, you might encourage wide exploration of occupations among

your students as a way to improve the quality of career decisions.

4. An Accurate Framework for Organizing and Filtering Information Perhaps the most frequent presenting complaint that clients make in career counseling is that they simply do not know how to proceed in making a career decision. This problem has been called lack of structure (Osipow, 1987) and is repeatedly found to be troubling (Spokane & Hawks, 1990).

5. Mobilization of Constructive Behaviors The final ingredient in a successful career intervention is the mobilization of the constructive behaviors, attitudes, and emotions that we know to be associated with high quality career decisions. Figure 1 depicts the range of reactions to career situations that a particular individual might display, from the most destructive to the most constructive. The task in most career interventions is to move the individual from destructive to constructive behaviors. The boxed-in entries are considered to be minimums in each domain. An individual who does not achieve these minimums may not experience a positive outcome.

The Technology of Career Intervention

No review of the career development field would be **complete** without some discussion of the innovative technology available for working with advisees who have career concerns. Interest inventories in their various forms, computer-assisted guidance and information packages, class and workshop programs, and the wide range of self-help books and materials are the most advanced assessment devices of any field in modern psychology.

A student may select from a diverse array of services consistent with the amount of time and energy she or he wishes to invest. Figure 2 depicts the range of services available in a typical counseling center. The student may self-refer or may be referred by an academic advisor or faculty member. As Figure 2 indicates, some of the services may be accessed without seeing a counselor, and some require a brief intake interview. Perhaps the most **popular** service on two- and four-year college campuses is the one semester career course. A surprising number of colleges offer such a course, and the effectiveness of these courses is remarkable (Oliver & Spokane, 1988).

Occupational interest inventories are completed by hundreds of **thousands—perhaps millions—of people** each year. These inventories

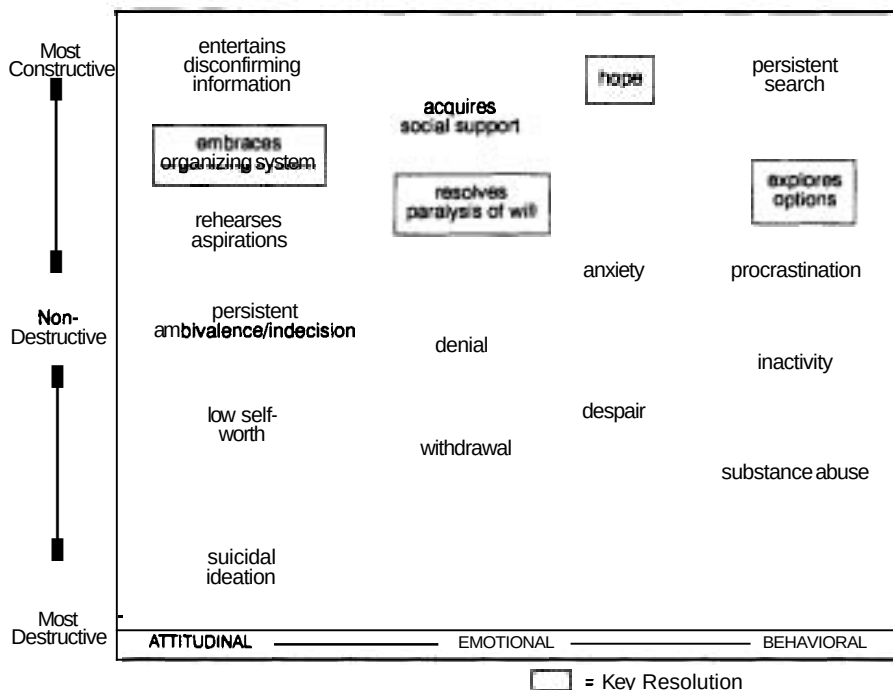


Figure 1. Attitudinal, Emotional, and Behavioral Responses to Career Situations

(Spokane, 1991; used with permission).

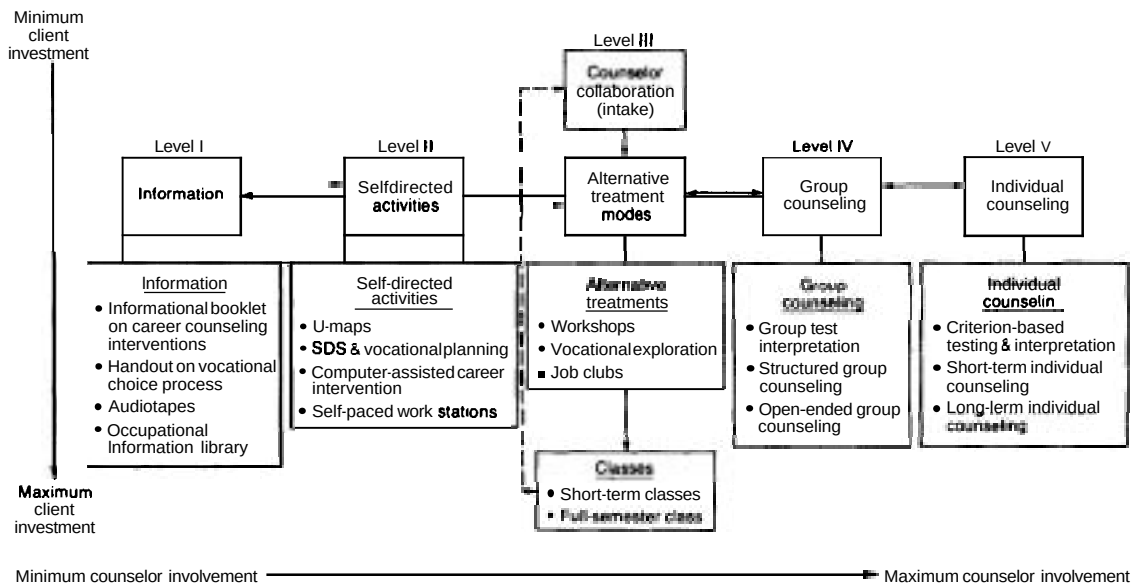


Figure 2. Career Intervention in a Comprehensive Counseling Center

(Spokane, 1991; used with permission. Adapted from unpublished work by Westbrook, Gelso, & Spokane.).

vary from simple self-scoring instruments such as the **Self-Directed Search** (Holland, 1985b) to more complicated, criterion-based inventories such as the **Strong Vocational Interest Blank** (Hansen & Campbell, 1985). These inventories compare one's interests to those of others who are stable in and happy with their career choices. Research tells us that about half the time individuals will enter occupations suggested by such an inventory and will be more likely to be happy with those congruent choices.

Almost all of the inventories are available in computer-assisted format, and some are accompanied by extensive guidance systems as well. The popular **DISCOVER**, **SIGI-plus**, and **CAREER POINT** systems are examples of the many computer-assisted guidance systems on the market (see Spokane, 1991, for a directory of publishers). Although still in their technological infancy, these systems are becoming more sophisticated daily, and there is evidence for their usefulness with clients.

Summary

Almost all individuals have occupational aspirations of some sort. These aspirations are tempered by the realities of the labor market and operate differently for disadvantaged social groups. One of the two dominant views about career development theory is the search model, in which individuals are considered to have formed occupational personalities that are the basis for selecting an occupation. The second view considers career choice to be a lifelong series of integrative syntheses, in which the individual encounters environmental barriers and then integrates experiences with these barriers into a self-concept. This process can often be a private and painful one, and the anxiety generated must be managed.

We are discovering more about the ingredients in a successful career intervention, including cognitive rehearsal of aspirations, social support, information about self and the world of work, an analytic framework (Holland et al., 1981), and mobilization of constructive behaviors. The technology of career assistance is growing at a rapid pace and is available to any individual who cares to use it. The academic advisor can play an important role in the early identification of career problems and in the discussion and amelioration of compromise conflicts. A difficult course is often the first sign of an impending compromise situation.

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