

Role of Self-Concept in Vocational Theory

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Pryor (1985) has argued that more attention should be devoted to the study of the structural properties of the self and less to the study of the self-concept, because the self-concept lacks explanatory power and reliance on it obfuscates attempts to derive a genuinely causal explanation of human behavior. The major problem with the self-concept, Pryor argues, is that it is relational and therefore is not genuinely causal. The present article argues that the relational aspects of the self-concept are in fact useful in explaining the paths people take to fulfill their more basic needs and goals. Although the self-concept has promise for explaining vocational behavior, it nevertheless has not been well conceptualized or well measured in vocational psychology.

Pryor (1985) has criticized vocational psychology in general and my theory (Gottfredson, 1981) in particular for their reliance on the self-concept as an explanatory construct. Pryor has concluded that self-concept lacks explanatory power and, therefore, that as long as theorists remain preoccupied with the self-concept, "they will continue to avoid facing the real challenge of providing a genuinely causal account of human behavior" (p. 157).

A major defect of the self-concept as an explanatory construct, according to Pryor, is that it reflects a person's *relation* to some externality, whereas genuinely causal explanations of behavior must focus on the inherent or *structural* properties of the person. Thus, he suggests that attention needs to be devoted to the self rather than the self-concept. Pryor does not outline what those structural properties might be that would be useful for explaining behavior, but he does refer to Freud's ideas of the id, ego, and superego to concretely illustrate the sorts of inherent properties he has in mind.

Pryor has done a service by raising questions about the usefulness of the self-concept in vocational theory. I, too, believe that certain problems regarding the concept stand in the way of more productive research and theory. I disagree, however, about what those problems are. In this article, I explain why the self-concept is not an evil to be "exorcised" from vocational psychology, as Pryor has proposed, but a concept whose value for theories of careers has hardly been tested. First, it is helpful to define the term *self-concept* and to indicate how it differs from the concept of the *self*.

Self-Concept and Its Relevance to Theories of Careers

There is little consensus in psychology or sociology about what the term *self-concept* means, but it is useful to think of the self-concept in terms of two major dimensions: identities and self-esteem. Identities refer to the *content* of one's perceptions and beliefs about oneself. Self-esteem refers to how one evaluates or *feels* about oneself. The self is the active agent; the self-concept is the view that this active self "has of himself as a physical, social, and spiritual or moral being" (Gecas, 1982, p. 3). Although the self-concept is often referred to as if it were a unitary thing, it is best conceptualized as the constellation of the perceptions and evaluations of themselves that people hold.

A person's self-concept does not necessarily mirror either the objective characteristics of that person's self or the opinions of others and usually does not (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). That is because people are less interested in testing the accuracy of their self-conceptions than they are in affirming and protecting them (Gecas, 1982, p. 4).

The different elements of the self-concept are not equally valued, nor are they necessarily even consistent. Stryker (1979) has suggested that people are not equally committed to all their identities and that identities can be arrayed in a "salience hierarchy." Essentially, my theory (Gottfredson, 1981) proposes such a hierarchy. It hypothesizes that people are more concerned about protecting their preferred gender identities than they are about protecting their identities of social class, ability level, or personality and that, of these identities, people are most willing to compromise the personality attributes they project.

The study of personal identities grew largely out of the symbolic interactionist perspective,

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whose goal it has been to delineate the "interpenetration of self and society" (Gecas, 1982, p. 10). One branch of this research is closely allied with and overlaps the study of social roles, because social roles are a means through which people participate as members of a society. Roles are sets of expectations for behavior, so they are also means through which societies shape the personal development and behavior of their individual members. People's occupations are among their most important social roles; occupations confer identities and restrict the kinds of identities and life-styles people are able to create or sustain. It should come as no surprise, then, that career development is a topic of widespread concern and that the self-concept has assumed such a central place in theories of career behavior.

A fundamental assumption of most vocational and counseling theories is that people prefer, seek, and are most satisfied in occupations that are consistent with their views of themselves. Correspondingly, two career development problems many people are assumed to face are (a) inappropriate self-concept (e.g., low self-esteem, faulty or unrealistic perceptions of one's own capacities or interests, and lack of self-knowledge—hence the use of interest inventories, values clarification, and other such techniques in counseling) and (b) finding ways to implement one's self-concept (e.g., through appropriate education, training, vocational decision making, and job-search techniques).

Super (1957) has been most influential in introducing the self-concept to vocational psychology. Ironically, however, it is probably the theories arising from the trait-and-factor tradition that have come closest to actually clarifying and measuring the identities that constitute the self-concept, because those theories have been most concerned with explaining individual differences in career development. Some of those theories deal primarily with the more personal identities (e.g., self-conceptions of personality; Holland, 1973), whereas others stress the importance of a person's more public and social identities (e.g., social-class status; Gottfredson, 1981).

Pryor's Criticisms of Self-Concept

Self-Concept Is Relational

Pryor argued that self-concept is not a useful concept because it reflects a person's relation to the environment rather than the inherent attributes of the person. His concrete example is the obvious inadequacy of trying to define the

properties of a dog by referring to where the dog stands in relation to a door or other features of the dog's environment.

It is indeed true that people's self-concepts reflect their views of where they "stand" in relation to the social environment, although it should be noted that the self-concept is also a reflection, albeit a distorted one, of people's more inherent properties (e.g., personality, physique). That it captures some of the relations between people and their environments is not a defect of the self-concept, however. On the contrary, this is one of its strengths. People's self-concepts are not only their views of themselves but also their views of themselves in society.

To illustrate the value of relational concepts more concretely, I will use Pryor's hypothetical dog. Although it tells me little about that dog to know that it is by the door, I learn a lot for some purposes if I am told whether the dog is a pet, a guide dog, a guard dog, or a police dog. None of these are inherent properties of a dog; they are relations to humans. But these descriptions tell me a lot about what kind of behavior I can expect from this particular dog in different circumstances and whether I would feel comfortable if the dog were standing by me instead of by the door. Indeed, people would be sorely handicapped in their daily as well as scientific affairs if they were to abandon relational concepts such as husband, wife, parent, child, teacher, student, community leader, friend, victim, and counselor.

Theorists must understand how people think they fit into society, how they feel about their places in society, and how they feel about themselves as a consequence in order to understand how individuals behave in a society. This information is not sufficient, of course, for understanding a person's social behavior, but it is necessary. If nothing else, an occupation represents a place in society, and vocational psychologists must understand how people view themselves in relation to society if they are to understand people's vocational choices and problems (Gottfredson, 1981). For example, many highly capable youngsters of low socioeconomic status (SES) fail to seek the educational and occupational levels actually available to them because they do not need to obtain a high-level job in order to be considered successful in their own social surroundings. Conversely, youngsters from high-SES families often feel compelled to obtain high-level jobs in order to maintain their standing in the eyes of family and friends, but this is no doubt a great source of strain and unrealistic aspirations for the less-capable youngsters. (See Gottfredson, 1981, p. 565, for a discussion of these

problems of “foreshortened horizons” and the “effort–acceptability squeeze.”)

Self-Concept Is Not as Motivational (i.e., Causal) as Is the Self

I am sympathetic with Pryor’s concern that theorists discover the wellsprings of human behavior, and I agree that most vocational theories do not deal explicitly with motivation as it has traditionally been conceived. But the failure to explicitly deal with the self as a source of motivation is not a fatal defect of a vocational theory, nor is it reason enough to abandon the current emphasis on the self-concept. Bolles (1978) has described how the study of motivation (e.g., drives and unconscious forces) may be disappearing in psychology, perhaps because motivators as traditionally conceived are neither necessary nor sufficient to explain the behaviors that have interested researchers. It is now widely presumed that not only are humans and other animals intrinsically active beings that direct their behavior toward certain goals (and thus do not require motivation or energizing, as previously presumed) but also their cognitions are important in explaining the direction and intensity of their behavior in different circumstances. To advocate a return to structural models of human motivation at the expense of the recent more cognitive ones, as Pryor seems to do, reflects an attempt to swim against the current of experience in psychology. This does not mean that Pryor is wrong, but it does mean that he must present a more persuasive case for following his suggestions than he has so far.

I do not mean to imply that the self-concept is devoid of motivational properties. In fact, the self-concept has become popular partly in reaction to earlier, more mechanistic, theories of human behavior, because it suggests that people are active creators of their own lives and not just passive reactors to environmental stimuli or creatures of habit and instinct. Gecas (1982) described three motives that are often associated with the self-concept—self-efficacy, self-esteem or self-enhancement, and self-consistency. Such motives are implicit in my own theory of occupational aspirations, and I suspect that they are in other theories of careers as well.

The aim of many, if not most, vocational theories does not seem to be to elucidate the ways in which these most basic human motives affect career behavior; rather, it seems to be to explain why certain groups of people (e.g., women, blacks, “enterprising” personalities) behave in certain ways (e.g., prefer the occupations they do, are satisfied or not with their jobs, are undecided

about their vocational choices) in different circumstances (e.g., if they live in low-SES versus middle-SES communities, if they have jobs incongruent with their personality types). To answer many of the theoretical and practical questions in vocational and counseling psychology, researchers may profit more from understanding the more proximate, rather than the deepest, influences on career behavior. The fate of certain theories suggests that this is so. For example, Roe’s (1956) theory of career development seems closer to Pryor’s prescription of studying the inherent attributes of individuals than does Holland’s (1973) theory, because the former postulates that various psychological needs shape occupational aspirations, whereas the latter deals more with the stereotypes people have of themselves and of occupations. Yet, there is much research that supports the usefulness and validity of Holland’s (1973) theory, whereas Roe’s developmental ideas have not fared well in empirical tests.

The following analogy helps to clarify the causal properties of the self versus the self-concept and to show why a knowledge of the latter is probably sufficient for many purposes. To acknowledge that the self is the captain of the ship, so to speak, does not diminish the importance of the navigator (the self-concept) or the seas surrounding the ship (the person’s environment) in determining the direction in which the captain sails. There are many ways to fulfill a need, drive, or goal, and what often interests researchers most is not the goal itself, which is often common to most people, but the ways in which people attempt to fulfill that goal and why some succeed and some do not. Researchers might have a better understanding of why people, often with the same inherent properties, take different career paths in life if they knew more about people’s perceptions of themselves and their perceptions of the demands and opportunities in their social environments. To some extent, of course, the self is a product of the self-concept, because the paths people take in life strongly influence what sorts of selves people will become.

Current Problems With the Self-Concept in Vocational Psychology

Two problems stand in the way of more productive research on the self-concept in vocational and counseling psychology. The first is that there has been little systematic analysis of what constitutes the self-concept. The concept means different things to different people in the field—sex-role attitudes, values in general, and Holland (1973) personality types, to name a few. Researchers need to clarify exactly what they do

and do not mean by the term. A helpful start might be to catalog the various identities that may be most relevant to career behavior. The literature reviewed by Gecas (1982) would provide some guidance in this matter. A more difficult but equally important task would be to begin outlining what the most common "salience hierarchies" might be. The paired-comparisons procedure suggested for this purpose by Gottfredson and Brown (1981, p. 287) would be one approach to this task.

The second problem is one shared by all fields that study the self-concept. The methodological state of self-concept research is dismal (Gecas, 1982). Measures of the self-concept are frequently untested or of questionable reliability and validity. Even vocational theorists who stress the importance of the self-concept do not specify how it should be measured. For example, if I were to criticize my own theory (Gottfredson, 1981), it would be to complain that it provides no way of actually measuring the "perceived social space" it suggests is so important.

The concluding statement in Gecas's (1982) review is equally applicable here:

How to reconcile the need for a more anthropomorphic conception of the human being . . . , one sensitive to the reciprocity in the self-concept/environment relationship, with the need for greater methodological precision is the major challenge in the study of the self-concept. (p. 27)

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