The Relationship Of Service-Learning Experiences To Career Decision Making

by Jane S. Smith, Mary I. Edens and Christina A. Dolen

In America today, individuals are born with the right to make two major choices in their lives: 1) whether or not they will marry, and, if so, whom; and 2) what they will do for a living. Psychologists agree that children go through a series of overlapping stages of emotional, intellectual, physical, and value development. Career development theorists present differing viewpoints, however, on how the "what I want to be when I grow up" decision is finally made. For some individuals, the decision seems to be an easy one. They are aware of their abilities and interests, and understand ways in which their aptitudes mesh with opportunities in the world of work. Other people need the assistance of guidance counselors who can provide occupational information and personal insights. Once this information is obtained, the opportunity to test the "fit" of possible career choices, through volunteer or service-learning experiences, can be of invaluable assistance in the overall career decision making process.

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Although theories of career development overlap and intertwine in many ways, they may be categorized into four groups: trait-factor, sociological, self-concept, and personality approaches.[1] The trait factor theory is the oldest approach. This model portends that matching the individual's abilities with vocational opportunities will solve the problem of vocational choice. Significant contributors to this theory have been Parsons (1909), Hull (1928), and Kitson (1925) with the vocational testing movement growing from this point of view. Examples of psychological tests are Strong Vocational Interest Bank, Kuder Preference Record, Differential Aptitude Test, and Guildford-Zimmerman Aptitude Survey.[2] The sociological model of career choice suggests that circumstances beyond the control of the individual contribute to the choice he makes. This theory also contends that the most important function of the individual is to develop environmental coping techniques. Leaders of this approach are Caplow (1954), Hollingshead (1949), Miller and Form (1951), and Harmony (1954).[3]

The personality approach theorists such as Holland (1959), Roe (1957), Small

(1953), and Schaeffer (1953) analyze the personality characteristics of people in different vocations and the personality factors involved in career choice and satisfaction.[4] The self-concept theory grows out of the early work of Buehler (1933) and involves research of Super (1957) and Ginzberg (1951). A more complete knowledge of this theory should provide a better understanding of the important role which experience can play in the developmental process of career choice.[5]

Eli Ginzberg, in his book Occupational Choice, discounts the accident theory of career choice stating:

> ...In explaining their occupational choices as accidents, most people seem to mean that they were affected by something beyond thier control – an unplanned exposure to a powerful stimulus. But the point which this theory overlooks is that in the life of every individual there are countless such occurrences only a few of which so stimulate the individual that he responds in a manner which has important consequences. The other exposures pass unnoticed and never merge from the background of events in the individual's life.[6]

His criticisms of the emotional force or impulse theory state that not only can a person find expression for specific interests in a large number of different occupations, but also that there are remarkable differences in the emotional make-up among members of the same occupation. His theory stemmed from the belief that career choice is a developmental process which can be delineated only as a result of understanding how internal and external forces in a person's life act and react on each other. His basic assumption is that an individual never reaches the ultimate decision at a single moment in time, but rather makes a series of decisions over a period of many years. He believes that this is an irreversible process, characterized by a series of compromises the individual makes between his wishes and his possibilities. As an example, when a person majors in engineering in college, his chances of selecting law as a career are minimized. The way in which an individual reaches occupational decisions as he matures hinges on the individual's understanding of what he likes and dislikes, of what he does well and what he does badly, and what values are meaningful to him. Individuals also become increasingly aware of their environment, developing new ways of analyzing those aspects which have a direct bearing on him or her. Ginzberg believes that the process of occupational decision making could be divided into three periods: fantasy, tentative, and realistic.[8] The first period (fantasy) occurs between six and eleven years of age and may carry over into early adolescence; the second (tentative) coincides with early and late adolescence; the third (realistic) occurs in early adulthood.

Ginzberg and his associates characterize the fantasy period as one in which the child's choices are arbitrary and lack reality.[9] A recent Associated Press article bears this out. Not one of the twenty-six Vicksburg, Michigan high school seniors who were asked "what they wanted to be when they grew up" in 3rd grade (their answers were tape recorded) had the same choice nine years later. Such selections as "policeman" had changed to "chemist" while that of "veterinarian" had become "broadcaster."[10]

Ginzberg subdivided the tentative period into four stages: interest, value, capacity, and transition.

Children first become aware of what they like to do, and then cognizant of the things they do more skillfully than others. In time they realize that some activities have more intrinsic or extrinsic value than others. The realistic period begins with the exploration state in which the young adult integrates his/her likes and dislikes with other capabilities in relation to his/her values. Only then does the young adult begin to implement the tentative choices. It is at this point of job entry or early college years that feedback of vocational behavior is particularly important. The results of this feedback lead to the crystalization phase and eventually to the specification stage.[12] It is in this exploration stage that world of work experiences, whether paid or volunteer, will be of the greatest value.

Ginzberg's statement of the problem which college freshmen face is as follows:

> ...The deliberateness and concern with which college freshmen groups are exploring the various aspects of their choice arises out of several facts. Many are still undecided between strong interests; others have real doubts whether they possess the capacities to succeed in the field of their special interest, and almost all are conscious of their limited knowledge of the world of work.
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> ...They wanted to learn more about the external world, and instead of acquiring an insight into the reality of the marketplace, they are immersed in academic subjects which are related tenuously, if at all, to specific vocations...College, instead of answering his questions, had added to them.[15]

In 1972, Ginzberg made three conceptual changes in his original theory: 1) He modified his assertion that career decision making was done in adolescence or early adulthood and stated that it was a life-span phenomenon; 2) He toned down his notion of irreversibility; and 3) He changed the concept of compromise to that of optimization.[16]

In conceptualizing his theory of career development, Donald Super was influenced by the self-concept theory illustrated in the writings of Carl Rogers, H.D. Carter, and E.S. Bordin, who theorized that behavior is a reflection of an individual's attempt to implement his self-descriptive and self-evaluative thought.[17] Charlotte Buehler's writings in developmental psychology, which suggested that life consisted of a series of distinct stages, also influenced Super's work.[18] Although he had been conducting research in the area of career development for many years, it was his criticisms of Ginzberg's work which finally led Super to formulate his first formal theoretical statement at the American Psychological Association in 1953. His book The Psychology of Careers was published in 1957. Super's theory states that a person strives to implement his self-concept through his choice of occupation. Work allows a person to achieve self actualization and makes it possible for one to play a role appropriate to that self-concept.[19] Super's self concept of vocation development consisted of 12 propositions. His revised proposal included the processes of:

1. Formation - beginning in infancy as exploration and establishment of an identity separate from others. It continues throughout life.

2. Translation - occurring in any of three ways. The person may identify with an individual involved in a given

occupation. He may gain experience through a role in which he is cast, perhaps by chance. Thirdly, he may be aware that he has certain attributes which are important to a certain field of work.

3. Implementation - coming upon departure from the classroom and entrance into a vocation or upon entrance into professional training.[21]

In 1963, Super identified five activities involved in the process which he called vocational devleopmental tasks. Crystalization requires a person to conceptualize ideas about work appropriate for himself and develop occupational and self-concepts which will help him make tentative educational decisions. Specification requires the individual to narrow a career decision and begin to implement it. Implementation requires the individual to complete training and enter relevant employment.[22]

Super notes the value of experience in the exploratory stage as follows:

...It provides youth with an opportunity to develop mature work habits...to mix with adults...try out adult roles and test the reality of his self-concept...If part-time or vacation work experience has some bearing on the student's vocational aspirations and plans, it also provides him with the opportunity to test his aptitudes. interests, and skills to find out whether or not he likes that kind of work...He learns about some of the kinds of situations in which that type of work is carried on, some of the kinds of people, equipment, activities and problems associated with that type of work.[23]

He also mentions the value of the opportunity to make contacts with a variety of adults who earn their living in a variety of ways.

Super's Transition Model incorporates the importance of experience into the career development of students. It is the translation phase which matches the student's values, abilities and interests with professionals in the field. Students often make academic choices and ultimately career choices based upon incomplete knowledge of what a person can do with a given set of skills. Thus, his or her choices are often based upon the likes and dislikes of academic ease or difficulty, rather than with the reality of the world of work.

At Michigan State University, the Office of Volunteer Programs (soon to be re-named the Service-Learning Center) provides this translation phase in the career development of students. During the 1977-78 academic year, 2,544 students from 136 different departments in 15 colleges were involved in community volunteer placements with one to three term commitments. A survey returned by 41% of these volunteers indicated that 70.2% had volunteered to gain career experience, while 15.8% were motivated by a desire for job contacts. For 63.1% of the students, the experience had an effect on career plans with 17.6% actually changing or considering changing their previous career decision.[24]

These community placements provide experiences for students in areas such as government, business, consumerism, health, mental health, corrections, education, special education, recreation, aging, and communications. While contributing many hours of service to the community, students have opportunity for personal growth and development, and an increased awareness of the world of work.

The opportunities also provide a feedback mechanism for the student in which s/he can help to find what Ginzberg calls the optimal fit between career preparation and the goals and realities of the world of work.

In rating the importance of the volunteer experience in relation to career awareness and/or preparation, MSU volunteers indicated the following opinions:

Gained support from others for career decisions	57.1% positive
Gained broader knowledge of careers and job requirements	69.8% positive
Gained first hand exposure to work environment and personnel in particular field	79.8% positive
Became realistically aware of how individual educational experience is serving as preparation for work opportunities . .	68.8% positive
Became aware of fit between job requirements and personal values and skills . .	78.2% positive

Students can test their skills with reality on the job, learn from professionals in the field, and develop attitudes based on realistic goals and experiences. Volunteer experiences help students broaden their awareness of job possibilities within their major field and select courses which would be useful to their career. Students become better able to translate their interests with a possible career fit based upon increased knowledge of occupations. The more experience which students gain, the smaller will be the gap in expectations. Thus, the expectations are realistic and the translation phase is based on the individual's experiences, attitudes and role models.

Richard Graham of Brookings Institute describes a good volunteer experience as manageable confrontation with novel responsibility, with the added proviso that experience earns esteem.[25] He states that development of self requires these manageable confrontations to provide opportunities for changing roles and changing structure of responsibilities. Thus, moving from carrying out orders, to participating in their formulation, to looking out for others will provide this change in role and responsibility which will help to foster true development.[26] Most part-time jobs available to college students include such tasks as working in fast food establishments, filing, or dorm maintenance. These positions require an entirely different level of responsibility than would volunteer positions tutoring children, helping mental health patients, or researching environmental concerns.[27]

College service-learning placements provide these manageable confrontations which help the student translate interest in possible career areas into knowledge of the fit between this occupation and self. Employers are looking for students with experience as well as sound academic preparation. Students involved in service-learning opportunities have both. By translating these college experiences into the world of work, students at Michigan State University and at many other institutions of higher education throughout the country are assisted in making one of life's most important decisions while increasing their marketability.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Osipow, Samuel H., Theories of Career Development (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1973), p. 9.

[2]Ibid., p. 10.

[3]Ibid.,

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ginzberg, Eli, Occupational Choice: An Approach to a Theory (New York: 1963), p. 19.

[7]Ibid., p. 24.

[8]Ibid., p. 60.

[9]Osipow, p. 84.

[10]"Nine Year Gap Changes Goals for 26 Students," The State Journal, Thursday, May 24, 1979, p. B-2.

[11]Osipow, p. 84.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ginzberg, p. 101.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid., p. 105.

[16]Osipow, p. 91.

[17]Osipow, p. 131.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Harkness, Charles, A., Career Counseling: Dreams and Reality, Springfield, Ill.: 1976, p. 27.

[20]Ibid., p. 28.

[21]Osipow, p. 139.

[22]Super, Donald A., The Psychology of Careers, New York: 1957, p. 89.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Smith, Jane, 1977-78 Annual Report: Office of Volunteer Programs, Michigan State University, East Lansing: 1978.

[25]Graham, Richard A., "Voluntary Action and Experimental Education," Journal of Voluntary Action Research, 1974, p. 190.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid.

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