
The Role of Work in Psychological Health and Well-Being

A Conceptual, Historical, and Public Policy Perspective

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The primary theme of this article, which serves as the introductory contribution of a special section of the American Psychologist, is that work plays a central role in the development, expression, and maintenance of psychological health. The argument underlying this assumption is articulated at the outset of the article in conjunction with a historical review of vocational psychology and industrial/organizational psychology. The article follows with an overview of contemporary vocational psychology and a presentation of the psychology-of-working perspective, which has emerged from critiques of vocational psychology and from multicultural, feminist, and expanded epistemological analyses of psychological explorations of working. Three illustrative lines of inquiry in which research has affected the potential for informing public policy are presented. These three lines of scholarship (role of work in recovery from mental illness; occupational health psychology; and working, racism, and psychological health) are reviewed briefly to furnish exemplars of how the psychological study of working can inform public policy.

Keywords: career, work, career development, psychological health, psychology of working

Despite the fact that work consumes so much time and is such a major concern in people's lives, psychological discussions of work, for the most part, have been compartmentalized or have been marginalized within our discipline. In this article and the two articles that follow, I, Fassinger (2008), and Fouad and Bynner (2008) provide an overview of the role of work in people's lives, with a particular emphasis on how psychologists can inform and shape public policy on work-related issues at both micro and macro levels. Our intention with these articles is to highlight the unique, and often overlooked, contributions of vocational psychology, which we believe are increasingly relevant to the continued growth and evolution of psychological discourse across specialties. In these three articles, we summarize innovative ideas and research findings from vocational psychology, with the objective of highlighting the central role that work plays in people's lives (cf. Richardson, 1993). Taken together, this set of articles has the potential to generate sustainable conversations and research about the unique and important

ways that psychologists can contribute to public policies that will increase access to fair, dignified, and rewarding work for an increasing proportion of citizens.

The role of work in psychological theory, research, and practice has had a long and complex history (Barling & Griffiths, 2002; Blustein, 2006; Richardson, 1993; Zickar, 2004). From a broad view, work has been studied primarily by industrial/organizational (I/O) psychologists and vocational psychologists, with additional input from rehabilitation psychologists (e.g., Neff, 1985; Riggall & Maki, 2004; Szymanski & Parker, 2003), health psychologists (e.g., Quick & Tetrick, 2003), community psychologists (e.g., Martín-Baró, 1994; Shore, 1998), and consulting psychologists (e.g., Lowman, 1993). I/O psychologists have tended to examine aspects of working that are pertinent to employers and organizations (e.g., Barak, 2005; D. T. Hall, 1996; Spector, 2005), seeking to respond to such questions as What sort of motivators can be established at a given organization to enhance productivity and reduce turnover? How can we select the best workers for a specific set of tasks? What are the core elements of effective leadership in a work setting? Vocational psychologists have explored the role of work in psychological functioning and development from a more individual perspective (e.g., Brown & Lent, 2005; Holland, 1997; Savickas, 2005), generally examining questions such as What career should I pursue? How do I explore my options? How can I move to a different line of work? How do I make decisions when I feel overwhelmed by anxiety and indecision? How can I be more satisfied in my work life? Both I/O psychology and vocational psychology have made substantial contributions to the social sciences, management, counseling, and education, and both are poised to continue making these contributions to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

In this set of articles, I and the other authors have elected to focus on the vocational psychological perspec-

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tive of work as the “figure” and to focus somewhat less on I/O psychology, which functions as the “ground” in our contributions. The major objective of this set of articles is to provide readers of the *American Psychologist* with an informative overview of the important contributions from vocational psychology, with a particular focus on the public policy implications of this body of work. Our rationale stems from several critical issues that are central to the work we present in this set of articles. First, in a manner consistent with the foundation of vocational psychology (e.g., Parsons, 1909), we are primarily concerned with the role of work in individual lives, which we believe offers considerable insights and relevance to a broad array of psychologists and public policy analysts. Second, vocational psychology has developed an expansive framework that is highly relevant to many new developments in psychological theory, research, and public policy. Third, although I/O psychology continues to develop innovative theories and tools for scholars and practitioners, its focus generally is limited to contexts and settings that are relatively circumscribed to those individuals with choice and volition about their work lives (Zickar, 2003, 2004). The material presented in this article and the two articles that follow seeks to embrace a wider spectrum of people who work and who wish to work. Indeed, we view these articles as a means of furthering the integration of work into psychology as a whole and as a means of enhancing the intellectual agenda of the full gamut of applied psychological disciplines. (In this article and the two that follow, *applied psychology* is defined as encompassing the psychological specialties that seek to understand and directly intervene in the lives of individuals and organizations, as exemplified by clinical psychology, counseling psychology, school psychology, and I/O psychology.) At the same

time, we acknowledge the rich contributions from I/O psychology, many of which have been infused into, and have informed, much of the vocational psychology agenda and practices and which are also embedded in these three articles.

Another critical theme of this set of articles is our collective focus on the implications of vocational psychology in relation to public policy. We believe that vocational psychological research has important applications for the development of public policies that are directed toward improving the quality and range of working experiences for individuals across the social and economic spectrum. In this article, I review the fundamental historical, theoretical, and research foundations of vocational psychology, briefly highlighting the public policy implications in three domains of life experience where working is central to psychological well-being: recovery from serious mental illness; occupational health; and the persistent existence of racism in many human societies. The article by Fouad and Bynner (2008) reviews the challenges and policy implications in the rich research literature on work-based transitions. The next article, by Fassinger (2008), summarizes the rapidly changing context of workplace diversity and reviews the emerging challenges to labor policy, educational policy, and health care policy. We have chosen these specific aspects of vocational psychology in order to highlight issues in which the interface between public policy and research is clearly evident and which provide a framework for further policy-based initiatives. In sum, then, these three articles highlight the central role of vocational psychology in informing public policy, and ideally they will serve as a means of encouraging further collaborations to expand the impact of policy-based research on the role of working in people’s lives.

Even with the considerable effort that I/O psychologists and vocational psychologists have devoted to understanding and intervening in the work realm of people’s lives, the full spectrum of psychological discourse still places working on the periphery of our discipline. For example, a review of many of the most commonly cited contributions on psychotherapy (e.g., Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1987; Lambert, 2003; Rogers, 1995; Yalom, 1980) yields little to no reference to the experiences that people have in their working lives. Moreover, considerable public-policy challenges face our nation (and indeed all nations around the world) as globalization and other social and economic forces rapidly change the nature of work in the 21st century (Arnett, 2002; Blustein, 2006; Friedman, 1999, 2005). For example, unemployment continues to plague the United States and other nations as societies struggle to find places in the labor market for their rapidly expanding and increasingly mobile populations across the globe. In addition, extensive social changes are taking place in global migration processes that are shifting the nature of nations and of the world (Arnett, 2002; Friedman, 2005). Furthermore, the expanding life span, especially in mature industrialized nations (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2004; Smyer & Qualls, 1999), is generating significant rethinking about the role of working in

people's lives, especially as people age and move into retirement, which can now last for decades. Because working is the social role in which people generally interact with the broader political, economic, and social contexts that frame their lives, working often becomes the nexus point for social oppression as well as a source of rewards, resilience, and relationships (Blustein, 2006). In this article, I provide a conceptual framework for psychologists to understand more fully the nature and impact of working as a critical factor in psychological health.

The Importance of Work in Psychological Health

One of the assumptions underlying this article and the two that follow (Fassinger, 2008; Fouad & Bynner, 2008) is that working is important, and indeed can be essential, for psychological health. Considerable research in vocational and I/O psychology has demonstrated that working can promote connection to the broader social and economic world, enhance well-being, and provide a means for individual satisfaction and accomplishment (Blustein, 2006; Brown & Lent, 2005; D. T. Hall, 1996; Spector, 2005). Perhaps the most obvious indication of how important work is to mental health is the fact that individuals who lose their jobs often struggle with mental health problems (such as depression, substance abuse, and anxiety; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004; Vinokur, Schul, Vuori, & Price, 2000). From an individual perspective, the loss of work has been consistently linked to problems with self-esteem, relational conflicts, substance abuse, alcoholism, and other more serious mental health concerns (Blustein, 2006; Feather, 1990; O'Brien, 1986; Stearns, 1995). Indeed, Lucas et al. (2004) found that German workers who lost their jobs experienced an expected decline in their well-being but also failed to return to their preunemployment levels of well-being even after they located new employment. This finding, coupled with the extensive literature on mental health outcomes of unemployment and underemployment (e.g., Mallinckrodt & Bennett, 1992; Vinokur et al., 2000), underscores the importance of working for psychological health and well-being.

From a broader community perspective, the loss of work has been associated with a notable decline in the quality of neighborhoods, a decline in the quality of family relationships, and an increase in crime as well as problems in other critical aspects of contemporary life (Elder, Eccles, Ardel, & Lord, 1995; Wilson, 1996). In a far-reaching study of urban Chicago by Wilson (1996), the loss of employment opportunities was linked empirically to a marked disintegration in the quality of life, with corresponding elevations in drug abuse, criminal activity, violence, and apathy. In Wilson's view,

the consequences of high neighborhood joblessness are more devastating than those of high neighborhood poverty. A neighborhood in which people are poor but employed is different from a neighborhood in which people are poor and jobless. Many of today's problems in the inner-city ghetto neighborhoods—crime, family dissolution, welfare, low levels of social organization, and

so on—are fundamentally a consequence of the disappearance of work. (p. xiii)

In short, working is a central ingredient in the development and sustenance of psychological health. The nature of working is inextricably linked to our evolutionary past, as our survival was (and still is) dependent on our ability to locate food, find shelter, and develop a community for mutual support and nurturance (Blustein, 2006; Donkin, 2001). Despite the centrality of work as a key factor in human evolution and contemporary social and economic life, current discussions about working in psychology, regrettably, do not have the same level of importance that is evident in people's voices when they talk about their lives and their most meaningful experiences (Blustein, 2006; Bowe, Bowe, & Streeter, 2000; Newman, 1999; Wilson, 1996).

Historical Roots of the Psychological Study of Working

The study of working from a psychological perspective began in earnest around the turn of the 20th century. With input from the emerging fields of vocational guidance (Parsons, 1909) and industrial psychology (see, e.g., Hale's, 1980, description of Münsterberg's early contributions), psychologists and other social and behavioral scientists have studied various aspects of work, with a particular emphasis on the challenges that people face in making and implementing career decisions (Brown & Lent, 2005; Gati, 1990; Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001). Many early efforts at understanding and intervening in the work lives of people explored a relatively inclusive array of workers, including the poor and immigrants (Davis, 1969; Parsons, 1909). Approximately a century ago, Parsons developed the framework of vocational counseling in a settlement house in the North End of Boston in order to facilitate the choices of immigrants about education and training, with the ultimate goal of helping people to make wise decisions about their work lives. The work of Parsons, who established the Vocation Bureau and wrote the landmark book *Choosing a Vocation* (Parsons, 1909), was embedded in a commitment to changing the life options for poor and working class immigrants (Davis, 1969; Hartung & Blustein, 2002). Parsons's vision of structured and thoughtful vocational interventions that could improve the lives of people on the margins continues to thrive in contemporary vocational psychology (Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2004; Richardson, 1993) and to a great extent informs the material presented in this article and the following two articles.

At around the same time, early efforts in industrial psychology began with psychologists exploring how organizations functioned and maximized their human resources (Bain, 1968; Hale, 1980; Kornhauser, 1947; Thompson & Spector, 2003). (In the early part of the 20th century, the psychological study of workers within organizations was known as industrial psychology; the addition of the organizational component occurred toward mid-century as organizational scholars and practitioners began to reshape the

mission of industrial psychology. See Koppes, 2006, for further details on the history of I/O psychology.) As in the development of vocational guidance, the emergence of industrial (and then I/O) psychology is linked to the expanding complexity of work as the industrial revolution led to dramatic growth in the range and quantity of employment opportunities. The burgeoning labor market led to a reorganization of the work environment, which became characterized by rapidly expanding opportunities for increasingly diverse jobs requiring different skills, personality attributes, and interests. Prior to the industrial revolution, the notion of choice and satisfaction in one's work life was primarily a function of being born into a privileged family. With the advent of industrialization, a greater proportion of people (although certainly not all people) had access to work that provided dignity, steady pay and benefits, and, for some, the personal satisfaction of engaging in interesting and valued tasks (Blustein, 2006).

After World War I, fueled in part by rapid developments in psychological assessment as a tool in selecting and training soldiers (Yoakum & Yerkes, 1920), the fields of vocational psychology and I/O psychology blossomed. For the most part, counselors, applied psychologists, and I/O psychologists adapted the newly developed knowledge about psychological testing to the challenges of career choice and personnel selection (Dawis, 1992; Gregory, 2004). New developments in interest assessment, personality appraisal, and intellectual testing soon provided further fertilization to the growing movement to enhance choice and selection (Gregory, 2004).

By the advent of World War II, the technology underlying the growing testing movement expanded to reshape the application of psychological theory and research to the understanding of working. Psychological tests were increasingly effective, albeit for circumscribed populations, and were applied to the challenges of selecting recruits for the complex jobs that the military demanded in the war effort. In the early to middle part of the 20th century, the training of psychologists often encompassed issues pertaining to work as well as nonwork issues. However, this integrative approach to thinking about psychological health was generally not sustained in the boom in psychological training that took place after World War II. The postwar era was characterized by the official designations of clinical and counseling psychology by the American Psychological Association (Baker & Benjamin, 2005), with the latter field continuing to focus on career development and work-related concerns, among other issues.

After World War II, a confluence of economic, psychological, and social forces coalesced to create an intellectual renaissance in both vocational psychology and I/O psychology. By the middle of the 20th century, a pluralistic vocational psychology emerged, along with the rise of more sophisticated tests, counseling tools, vibrant theories, and methods to help people make wise decisions and adjust to work-related problems (Brown, 2002; Brown & Lent, 2005; Herr, 2001; Savickas & Baker, 2005; Super, 1957). Similar developments in I/O psychology also led to efforts at improving management, enhancing personnel selection,

and evoking rapid growth in the understanding of organizational change processes (Spector, 2005; Vroom, 1964; Zickar, 2003).

One of the outcomes of the developments in the middle to late 20th century was the growing bifurcation of psychological studies and treatment of work-related issues from other aspects of psychological scholarship and practice. The pressure toward increasing specialization in psychology (and other fields) soon resulted in applied psychologists who were trained to work in more circumscribed domains, such as counseling psychology, clinical psychology, school psychology, and I/O psychology. Within the health service domains of applied psychology, the demands of mental health practice and the expansion of third-party reimbursements enhanced the movement toward mental health practice with less of a focus on vocational or work-related issues, which were generally not covered by health insurance. A by-product of this trend is that the study of work issues in psychology and the treatment of work-related concerns became increasingly marginalized within mainstream psychology. Despite the trend toward specialization, many psychologists within vocational and I/O psychology (Blustein, 2006; D. T. Hall, 1996; Niles & Pate, 1989; Savickas, 1993) and psychologists outside of these areas (e.g., Axelrod, 1999; Lowman, 1993; Shore, 1998) have argued for an integrative approach to the full gamut of human experience that thoughtfully encompasses working.

The separation of work from other domains of life is not consistent with the lived experiences of people, whose lives do not conform to neat and tidy boundaries established by scholars to facilitate the study of human behavior (Blustein, 2006; D. T. Hall, 1996; Juntunen, 2006; Peterson & González, 2005; Richardson, 1993). Although this point is intuitively and logically compelling, the trends in professional psychology have created pressure toward increased specialization in understanding and treating individual problems and broader social concerns. One notable exception to this trend is the contributions from vocational rehabilitation counseling and rehabilitation psychology (e.g., Elliott & Leung, 2005; Szymanski & Parker, 2003). Scholars from the rehabilitation movement have articulated a view that psychological health is integrally linked to recovery from a disabling event or condition (Riggat & Maki, 2004; Rubin & Roessler, 2001). Moreover, vocationally oriented interventions have been systematically linked to psychotherapeutic and systemic interventions within the rehabilitation community. In addition to the rehabilitation psychology movement, contributions from a growing set of voices within psychology and related fields have sought to connect work-related issues to mainstream psychological theory and to psychotherapeutic practice (Axelrod, 1999; D. T. Hall, 1996; Lowman, 1993; Richardson, 1996; Savickas, 1993; Shore, 1998). In addition, rapid growth in the study of occupational health psychology (e.g., Quick & Tetrick, 2002) has generated a keen interest in the way in which work functions in the broader spectrum of health and wellness. Furthermore, recent advances in positive psychology have identified the critical role that satisfying work plays in psychological well-being across various domains

of human functioning (e.g., Doest, Maes, Gebhardt, & Koelewijn, 2006; Lent, 2004; Lucas et al., 2004). When considered collectively, these efforts at reducing the boundaries between studies of work and career behavior and other aspects of psychosocial functioning have played a significant role in creating the current blossoming of interest in the role of work in psychological well-being.

We are now approaching a critical juncture point in the study of working within psychology. A growing body of knowledge is now emerging that, when taken together, offers psychology a potent intellectual framework for the expansion of interest in working and the application of this interest and resulting research to the public policy sector. The current state of scholarship and practice in vocational psychology that is now emerging parallels the passion and commitment for the underserved and marginalized that led Frank Parsons (1909) to establish a vocational guidance bureau in a settlement house 100 years ago (Hartung & Blustein, 2002). And, as Parsons's contributions helped to mobilize nascent forces in society to develop effective interventions for a wide array of client groups, psychologists are similarly poised to chart a new trajectory for psychology and the behavioral sciences that can inform the transformation of the nature of work in the 21st century.

Working as a Source of Dreams and Disappointments

One of the themes of this article and the two that follow is that the world of vocational psychology is a vibrant and productive field that is undergoing a renaissance with new ideas and research findings that are relevant to the full scope of psychological and social functioning. With the advent of feminist and multicultural perspectives (Friedan, 1963; Gilligan, 1982; Helms & Cook, 1999; Leong, 1995; Miller, 1986; Vera & Speight, 2003) as well as broadened epistemological assumptions (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Prilleltensky, 1997; Stead, 2004; Young & Collin, 1992), vocational psychologists are now exploring how working functions as the focal point for individuals as they interact with the social, political, and economic world. In effect, when people work or consider work, they are engaging in an overt and complex relationship with their social world. Individuals often dream about having a work life that will be rewarding and meaningful; at the same time, people have to struggle with disappointment in their work lives as they seek to adapt to situations in which they often have little control or autonomy (Blustein, 2006). For many people, working is the "playing field" of their lives, where their interactions with others and with existing social mores are most pronounced, with opportunities for satisfaction and even joy, as well as major challenges and, at times, considerable psychological and physical pain.

Theoretical and Practice Frameworks Within Vocational Psychology

Vocational psychologists have increasingly viewed this complex and often unpredictable playing field through a variety of lenses, identifying both the dreams and disap-

pointments that can be evoked by working. The feminist revolution of the middle to late 20th century has fostered a deep understanding that work represented one of the means for empowerment (Betz, 1989; Brooks & Forrest, 1994; Fassinger, 2000). The multicultural movement also expanded the horizons of vocational psychology to encompass the reality that culture and race matter in our lives and that these factors perhaps matter most pervasively in the world of work (Carter & Cook, 1992; Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2004; Helms & Cook, 1999). In addition, the intellectual revolutions of the past few decades, which have been characterized by a critique of the hegemony of logical positivism (Gergen, 2001; Prilleltensky, 1997), have profoundly influenced vocational psychology. Currently, vocational psychology has adopted a wider array of perspectives to inform scholarship and practice. The days of "test 'em and tell 'em" and "three interviews and a cloud of dust," which were unfortunate, although often accurate, descriptions of vocational counseling in the middle to later part of the 20th century, have now been supplanted by the knowledge that working is part of a broader fabric of life that is intertwined with our inner lives and our contexts in complex and illuminating ways (Peterson & González, 2005; Savickas, 2005). Prior to detailing how the renaissance of knowledge is transforming vocational psychology and psychological discourse in general, I first review the major theoretical perspectives and their related practice implications that have been developed to understand career choice and development. These theoretical perspectives, when considered collectively, have provided the framework for the invigorated scholarship that is outlined here (and detailed further in the next two articles).

Amidst the openness to new ideas that characterizes vocational psychology, the current intellectual landscape of vocational psychology is characterized in part by the continued vitality of logical positivism. The logical positivist tradition is perhaps most clearly represented by the person-environment (PE) fit perspective, which relies on the classic scientific method in deriving inferences about vocational behavior and in developing intervention strategies (Dawis, 2005; Holland, 1997; Tracey, 2002). In short, PE-fit perspectives are based on the assumption that people are best suited for a circumscribed array of occupations that are consistent with their interests, abilities, personality attributes, and values. The two major exemplars of PE-fit theory include Holland's (1997) well-known theory of career choice and the theory of work adjustment (Dawis, 2005), which reflects a modern and somewhat more dynamic approach to PE-fit assumptions.

The theoretical contributions of PE-fit theory have helped to establish the framework for the use of psychological tests (such as interest inventories, personality assessments) in career counseling (Holland, 1997). The prevailing counseling model that has emerged from PE-fit theory generally emphasizes the notion that individuals can be matched to an optimally fitting work environment on the basis of the identification of personality attributes and the salient characteristics of given work environments (Dawis, 2005). In many ways, the core of the PE-fit model is

common to most contemporary approaches to career counseling, which seek to help clients find an optimal match in the world of work.

Another major movement in vocational psychology, which reflects the cognitive models of motivation and behavior that are prevalent across many domains of psychological theory and practice, is social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent & Brown, 1996; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002). SCCT, which is based on an application of Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory to the challenges of career choice and development, has furnished vocational psychology with a highly useful lens for understanding how people make decisions about work and school, develop interests, and deal with the barriers that exist in their educational and work lives.

The emphasis on self-efficacy and outcome expectations, which are central in the SCCT formulation, provides counselors and educators with viable constructs to highlight in their work with clients and students (Lent et al., 2002). In addition, the SCCT contributions have helped to generate an interest in understanding the resources and barriers that frame the career choice and career implementation processes (Lent & Brown, 1996).

Building on the rich tradition of Super (1957; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996), who advanced a comprehensive developmental theory of vocational behavior, is the work of Savickas (2002, 2005), who has proposed a theory of career construction. Savickas has thoughtfully expanded Super's (1957) seminal propositions about career choice and development by incorporating narrative and constructivist ideas into the developmental framework that Super proposed in the middle part of the 20th century. Like Super, Savickas has articulated a perspective that seeks to understand and explain career behavior across the life span and the life space and that is richly integrative.

The counseling implications of Savickas's (2002, 2005) extension of Super's (1957; Super et al., 1996) work are replete with innovative ideas for counseling practice. Like Super's work, Savickas's theoretical position provides a powerful conceptual framework for integrating nonwork and work life roles in a narrative approach that seeks to help clients discover their salient attributes in a creative and evocative manner. Savickas's work also provides counselors with tools for placing vocational tests into a broader theoretical model that affirms the importance of human agency in the development and expression of individual life themes in the world of work and in related life domains.

The three traditional theoretical contributions reviewed here have been invaluable in helping to explicate the nature of career decision making and vocational adjustment. These perspectives, singularly and in tandem, also have facilitated thoughtful discussions of inequities in the world of work, especially in relation to gender (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Fassinger, 2000) and race (e.g., Carter & Cook, 1992; Helms & Cook, 1999; Smith, 1983). Although the aforementioned theories represent the current mainstream of vocational psychological thought, innovative new perspectives are emerging. Taken together with the traditional theories summarized above, the psychological

study of career development and working reflects the growing acceptance and affirmation of different epistemological viewpoints. For example, systems theory (Patton & McMahon, 1999) has been applied to many of the questions of career choice and development. The systemic view locates working in a conceptual framework that is analogous to the intersecting roles and responsibilities that emerge as people actually describe their lives (Blustein, 2006; Bowe et al., 2000). Another illustrative line of inquiry is action theory (Young, Valach, & Collin, 2002), which is based on an application of a social constructionist perspective to the challenges of understanding how people adapt to the preparation for and implementation of their career decisions. In addition, the multicultural lens has been applied to questions about the way in which race and culture play a role in the development and implementation of educational and career plans (e.g., Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2004). Furthermore, relational theories that focus on the primacy of strivings for connection in human experience (e.g., Bowlby, 1982; Josselson, 1992) have been thoughtfully integrated with the study of working and career development (Blustein et al., 2004; Flum, 2001; Phillips et al., 2001; Schultheiss, 2003).

The infusion of feminist and multicultural perspectives has underscored inequities that have functioned to create a working world that varies markedly with respect to one's capacity to make choices about educational and training opportunities and ultimately about one's option to choose a given line of work. Building on the contributions of vocational psychologists who have sought to expand the focus beyond the purview of individuals who have access to the resources that create opportunities, a number of scholars have advocated that psychologists focus on work and working as opposed to the relatively exclusive examination of volitional careers (e.g., Blustein, 2001, 2006; Fouad, 2007; Peterson & González, 2005; Richardson, 1993). Arguing that the notion of career is circumscribed to those with the means of engaging in advanced training and deliberation about their work lives, a group of psychologists and counseling professionals, inspired in large measure by Richardson's (1993) contribution, have advocated that the study of working ought to encompass all people who work and who want to work. Prior to outlining how the psychological study of working can impact public policy, the new psychology-of-working-framework is presented with a focus on how this perspective has the potential to inform how psychologists understand and, ultimately, treat work-related issues.

The Psychology-of-Working Perspective

Building on the feminist and multicultural critiques of traditional psychological discourses as well as a growing interest in expanding epistemological lenses, the relatively circumscribed focus of a psychology of careers is being enhanced with an inclusive focus on working (e.g., Blustein, 2006; Fouad, 2007; Peterson & González, 2005; Richardson, 1993). A key element of the psychology-of-work-

ing perspective is the identification of three fundamental human needs that working has the potential to fulfill (Blustein, 2006). When considered collectively, this taxonomy offers a means of considering how working functions in people's lives to meet their needs for survival, relatedness, and self-determination, respectively.

Need for Survival

One of the needs that working fulfills is that it provides access to resources that help to ensure continued survival. As Maslow (1943) articulated, the need for survival is at the core of human experience and motivation. Without work, people often struggle considerably to obtain money or other sources of sustenance that furnish food, shelter, and clothing.

A close examination of the evolutionary history of humankind reveals that as social organizations grew more complex, access to resources became increasingly stratified (Blustein, 2006; Wallman, 1979). Inherent in the stratification of society was the development of social categories, often based on demographic and phenotypic attributes, that had little, if any, relevance to the development and expression of competence in resource allocation and production (Esping-Andersen, 1993; Giddens, Duneier, & Applebaum, 2005). These social categories, which still persevere across many cultures (Carter, 2004; Helms & Cook, 1999; Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005), continue to result in problematic relations among people, with the outcome often manifested in access to education, health, and other antecedents of meaningful work. The psychological study of working may provide important clues about the etiology of social categorization and, as we shall explore later, may lead to some informative implications for public policy attempts directed to ameliorating some of the root causes of prejudice and social oppression (Blustein, 2006; Richardson, 1993; Wilson, 1996).

Need for Relatedness

Another critical need that working provides is access to social support and relational connections. Recent contributions in vocational psychology and organizational psychology have identified the essential role that working plays in providing people with access to the relational world (Blustein, 2001; Flum, 2001; Hall, 1996; Phillips et al., 2001; Schultheiss, 2003). On one level, many (but certainly not all) jobs involve some structured and informal interactions with others. At the same time, working links people to the broader social and cultural fabric of life; people who work often report that they feel more connected to the economic and social welfare of their communities (Blustein, 2006; Bowe et al., 2000). By incorporating an explicit focus on the relational needs that can be fulfilled by working, a more integrative mode of thinking about the intersection of working and interpersonal aspects of life may result, which will ideally function to diminish the artificial boundaries that have split off integral aspects of human functioning.

Need for Self-Determination

The third need that working has the potential to fulfill is self-determination (Blustein, 2006). For much of the 20th century, vocational and I/O psychologists generally have focused on job satisfaction (Blustein, 2006; Cranny, Smith, & Stone, 1992; Fritzsche & Parrish, 2005). From a psychology-of-working perspective, the focus is much broader, encompassing the broad spectrum of volition that characterizes the decisional options open to most people, both within mature industrialized nations (generally within the Pacific rim nations, North America, and Europe) as well as outside of these relatively affluent communities. One means of understanding the motivational aspects of working, when considering the full gamut of people who work, is to infuse relevant ideas from motivational psychology into conceptualizations about the nature of working. Self-determination theory, advanced by Deci and Ryan (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), offers a useful perspective that can elaborate how people are motivated to engage in working, even in situations where job satisfaction and the expression of intrinsic interests are not readily available.

Self-determination refers to the experience of authenticity, which is often characterized by a feeling that one is authoring the direction of one's life (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to self-determination theory, people who are intrinsically motivated to engage in the activities of their jobs are able to experience self-determination, which reflects the capacity to initiate and sustain motivation in an authentic fashion. Ryan and Deci also have described how extrinsically motivated activities can be internalized if people value the outcomes of these efforts and if people have access to supportive contextual conditions. For individuals who are forced to take jobs that are not necessarily satisfying or interesting, self-determined functioning may be attained when they have access to conditions that foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The psychology-of-working framework represents an exemplar of new thinking in vocational psychology that is attempting to expand the purview of contemporary psychological studies of working. A key element of this perspective is that working is indeed central to individual psychological health and to the welfare of communities (Blustein, 2006; Fouad, 2007; Richardson, 1993). As psychologists increasingly place working on the center stage of our thinking and concern, other integrative and inclusive perspectives will emerge that have the potential to reshape public policy. The groundswell of intellectual and social action movements concerned with working and psychological well-being that have been thriving in recent years has created a robust knowledge base that has the potential to inform public policy. The three illustrative issues raised next serve to foreshadow the more sustained discussions that are detailed in the two articles that follow (Fassinger, 2008; Fouad & Bynner, 2008) and that ideally should be forthcoming as psychologists increasingly consider the public policy implications of working.

Work and Psychological Health: Implications for Public Policy

A central tenet of this article is that work is critical to psychological health and well-being. In the material that follows, selected issues in vocational psychology and the psychology of working are presented, with the intention of identifying public policy ramifications. The issues that are presented next (and that are featured in the two subsequent articles) represent illustrations of the vast potential that the psychological study of working can have for public policy about employment practices, racism, health, and unemployment, among other compelling social issues. The choice of content issues that are reviewed next and in the following articles reflects the “tip of the iceberg” of arenas of life experience that are both important for psychological health and amenable to our input.

Working and Recovery From Mental Illness

The relationship between mental illness and working is complex, offering an insightful exploration of the connection between work and psychological well-being. As noted earlier, the recovery from mental illness is often characterized by a transition into the labor market (Auerbach & Richardson, 2005; Becker & Drake, 2001; Flinn, Ventura, & Bonder, 2005; Sallett, 2001). Research and recent policy advocacy efforts have suggested that people struggling with mental illness appreciate the satisfaction and social interaction that work offers and find it helpful in their recovery (Auerbach & Richardson, 2005; Marrone & Golowka, 1999). Moreover, working provides adults with long-term mental health challenges with a means of connecting to others and a means of experiencing a sense of contribution to the overall economic and social climate of their communities (Blustein, 2006; Goldberg, Killeen, & O’Day, 2005).

Implications for public policy. The interface of working and mental health, which has been central in rehabilitation psychology (Szymanski & Parker, 2003), has significant implications for public policy. First, the entire spectrum of policies related to moderate and serious mental illness would be enhanced by expanding the available knowledge about the psychological meaning and impact of working as experienced by individuals with psychiatric disorders. Second, the extent to which working provides a source of resilience for individuals with disabling conditions needs to be delineated and applied to public policy. If we are able to identify and derive meaningful inferences about the variability of beliefs regarding working that are found among individuals with psychiatric disabilities, we will have far more information with which to inform the development of rehabilitation programs and support services. Moreover, new legal initiatives that are developed to enhance the quality of life for individuals with moderate to severe mental illness need to be informed by a clearer understanding of the psychological meaning and implications of working (cf. Goldberg et al., 2005). Furthermore, the impact of working (and not working) on mental health, in general, needs to be explicated in subsequent research

and applied to emergent policy on unemployment and psychiatric rehabilitation.

One particularly notable exemplar of effective public policy, engendered in part from psychological research on the nature and consequences of disabling conditions, is the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, which has changed much of the landscape of treatment, employment opportunities, and access to services for a wide array of individuals with disabling conditions (see Fassinger, 2008, for further details). This policy change has included individuals with severe and moderate mental illness and has provided legal protection from discrimination and marginalization. Naturally, this legislation cannot remove social stigmas and implicit discrimination, which clearly continue to exist in the lives of many individuals with chronic mental health problems.

Occupational Health Psychology, Well-Being, and Working

With the input of health psychologists and I/O psychologists, a vibrant field has emerged in recent decades, falling under the purview of occupational health psychology (Quick & Tetrick, 2002). As Tetrick and Quick (2002) noted, “The purpose of occupational health psychology is to develop, maintain, and promote the health of employees directly and the health of their families” (p. 4). The interdisciplinary nature of occupational health psychology, which has involved psychologists from a wide array of disciplines as well as other behavioral scientists and practitioners, foreshadows the sort of approach that we (i.e., the authors of this special section of the *American Psychologist*) advocate in calling for sustained studies of the role of work in people’s lives. As a field, occupational health psychology has made unique and important contributions to the study of worker well-being and has examined the impact of individual and contextual factors in the physical and psychological health of working people and their families (Quick & Tetrick, 2002).

Holding views similar to those articulated earlier within the psychology of working and vocational psychology, scholars in occupational health psychology are cognizant of the central role that working plays in human experience and in the maintenance and sustenance of physical and mental health (cf. Barling & Griffiths, 2002; Quick & Tetrick, 2002). A number of important research agendas have emerged out of the integrative work of occupational health psychologists that illustrate the close interface that exists between psychological research on working and broad systemic and policy-based interventions. For example, the scholarship on work-related stress has documented the extensive costs of job stress in terms of individual human consequences (medical problems, burnout, substance abuse) and organizational consequences (reduced productivity, turnover) (Spielberger, Vagg, & Wasala, 2002). Moreover, the shifting nature of the world of work, which is often manifested in individuals by feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and alienation (Blustein, 2006; D. T. Hall, 1996; Sennett, 1998), has contributed to some extent to the experience of stress that is related to the need to

obtain and maintain work. As Wilson (1996) documented, a lack of work is linked to feelings of stress and psychological instability, thereby underscoring the complexity of modern life and the struggle people experience in trying to find ways of feeling secure in a world that is replete with change (cf. Blustein, 2006).

Implications for public policy. A considerable literature exists in occupational health psychology demonstrating that changes in the work environment can lead to notable improvements in worker well-being (Quick & Tetrick, 2002). For example, Barling and Griffiths (2002) observed that many of the fundamental research findings from occupational health psychology (regarding the importance of worker control and participation in organizational decision making) have been incorporated into legislation. Barling and Griffiths further documented how Sweden developed legislation in the late 1970s that gave workers input on how jobs were structured and also enhanced the degree of fit between workers' attributes and the characteristics of a given job. Additional public policy initiatives have been observed in the European Union, which requires each member country to improve worker safety and well-being. Similar efforts are under way in the United States under the oversight of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (Barling & Griffiths, 2002).

Space limitations prohibit a more detailed exploration of the research/public policy linkage that exists in occupational health psychology. However, a compelling rationale and a firm conceptual framework exist in occupational health psychology to fuel important legislative and policy initiatives with respect to the full scope of worker experiences. Although the occupational health psychology movement has generated considerable scholarship and important legislative initiatives (Quick & Tetrick, 2002), a broader and more inclusive mission, ideally linked with the goals of vocational psychology and the psychology of working, would yield a powerfully compelling scholarly and public policy agenda. The vocational psychology perspective would help in the exploration of how issues of career decision making, developmental processes across the life span, and PE fit interface with occupational health and well-being. The psychology-of-working perspective, in particular, offers an opportunity for researchers in occupational health psychology to expand their horizons to all workers and to those who are struggling to obtain access to the labor market.

Working, Racism, and Psychological Health

The blight of racism continues to characterize nearly all sectors of society around the globe. One of the key arenas in which racism is manifested is the workplace (Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2004; Helms & Cook, 1999; Konrad, Prasad, & Pringle, 2006), which functions as one of the locations where social categorization and the resultant psychological, physical, social, and financial manifestations are often most prominent. The impact of race on earnings, occupational mobility, access to promotions, and access to education and training is well documented in the literature

(Blustein, 2006; Carter, 2004; Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2004; Konrad et al., 2006). In a recent review of the literature on racism, working, and psychological health, Fouad and Byars-Winston (2004) observed that barriers that exist in social structures (such as education, health care, institutional racism, housing, access to work, and training opportunities) play a significant role in creating and maintaining the differences that exist in salaries, occupational attainment, and access to fair and dignified working conditions. In short, the existence of phenotypic and/or cultural differences can lead to significant distinctions in how people fare in obtaining work, adjusting to work, and sustaining work.

Although existing psychological theories, such as racial identity theory (Helms & Cook, 1999), have played a major role in providing an understanding of how racism is internalized into the inner psyche and, indeed, how race is manifested in the social fabric of most contemporary cultures, much more knowledge is needed about the interface of working and racism. One source of needed scholarship is from sociology's macro-level analyses of working. As indicated earlier, Wilson's (1996) evocative study of urban Chicago conveyed the deep despair that occurred in a community of color when work disappeared from the neighborhoods. A similar set of findings is evident in Newman's (1999) ethnographic study of urban adolescents of color, which documented how working provided insulation, relational resources, and instrumental support for avoiding the obstacles evoked by racist practices in the community and thereby led to greater success in school and relationships.

Given the importance of working, one could simply advocate for continued investments in job training and education as a means of creating social change in relation to the pernicious impact of racism. In my view, this is a notable recommendation, one that continues to have relevance. However, the exploration of the role of working within the discussion about race and psychological health has the potential to enhance the debate about how to reduce and, ultimately, eradicate racism. Working is the focal point of existing racist practices, yet it represents a context that is amenable to thoughtful leadership with respect to reform and social change. As the military integrated in the post World War II era in the United States, thereby forcing a reckoning with existing institutional racism in the mid-20th century, similar initiatives may be generated within the current occupational environment. In order to further the case for structural changes in training and labor policy, the importance of collaborative efforts among the full range of psychologists and other behavioral scientists who can document the pervasive impact of racism on psychological health needs to be emphasized. Existing research from occupational health psychology (e.g., Quick & Tetrick, 2002) and from psychological studies of working (e.g., Blustein, 2006; Konrad et al., 2006) have affirmed that racism is a major factor in physical and psychological health problems for workers. Moreover, a lack of work, which is often a result of racist practices in education, training, and employment, represents a considerable health

risk (Barling & Griffiths, 2002; Vinokur et al., 2000). Large-scale research projects that document these impacts and that chart the human costs of tolerating racism in training and the labor market ideally involve a fuller spectrum of psychologists, including clinicians, social psychologists, community psychologists, counseling/vocational psychologists, and I/O specialists. Research that furthers the arguments and data presented by Wilson (1996) would be a forceful impetus for structural change.

Implications for public policy. Acknowledging the pernicious nature of racism in the United States and many other countries is critical, as the problem is multifaceted and merits all of the intellectual, economic, and moral power that nations can muster. With that point in mind, a focus on the role of working in public policy efforts designed to end racism is critical. As indicated previously, research that details how racism continues to plague the workplace and the institutions that support and frame the workplace (i.e., education and training programs) is clearly needed. Yet some of this research is already evident in the literature, and indeed, some of it is quite widely cited (e.g., Wilson, 1996). One of the dilemmas that psychologists face is finding a way to communicate the findings so that a broad audience can internalize the emotional and intellectual impact of this body of data.

Another important way that psychologists can inform public policy is by advocating for equity and diversity training in the workplace. Establishing workplaces that are structured to accept and affirm all workers despite differences in skin color and culture, naturally, is a major struggle, despite laws in many nations that prohibit discrimination in hiring and promotion practices (Konrad et al., 2006). It is clear that more is needed to effect structural change. One of the most potent means of effecting personal growth is diversity training (Barak, 2005; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006). Changes in the workplace that create environments where people learn about the impact of racism can be enormously useful in educating sectors of the population that are ignorant or in denial about the continued existence and impact of racism. In effect, psychologists can present research that underscores the impact of diversity training, which would facilitate legislation that links diversity training to access to government contracts and/or tax incentives, thereby providing needed leadership for organizations and managers. Diversity training offers only one means of effecting change; ideally, when it is used most efficaciously, it can start a paradigm shift in how people manage differences in all sectors of their lives.

In addition to diversity training, psychologists interested in working can advocate for policies that will enhance equity in the labor market, such as affirmative action. Although a full discussion of affirmative action is beyond the scope of this article, it does represent the utility of using the workplace (and the antecedents of working—education and training) as the focal point for social change designed to reduce inequity. An infusion of scholarship from psychologists interested in working may be quite informative to public policies on affirmative action and may lead to

interventions that are effective in ameliorating the continued blight of racism in our society.

Conclusion

This article has been constructed as a roadmap for readers to explore the role of work in psychological health. Like any map, the material that I have presented does not cover all of the nuances of a road trip through the heart (and perhaps some of the soul) of the psychological study of working. My intention has been to whet the intellectual appetite of readers to continue this journey through the two articles that follow as well as the rich literature that I and these authors cite. As we (Fassinger, 2008; Fouad & Bynner, 2008) seek to convey, work is a central aspect of life; indeed, the struggle to earn one's livelihood represents perhaps the most consistent and profound way in which individuals interface with their social, economic, and political contexts.

The position presented in this article and in the subsequent articles centers on the belief that the psychological study of working is critical for our field to furnish a fully comprehensive understanding of human behavior. We also believe that the era of categorizing and slicing up domains of life experience in accordance with existing psychological specialties is no longer acceptable. As we document in these articles, the stakes are too great. Working represents the lifeblood of people, whose hopes and dreams are tied to the activities that they engage in to make a living. When working is going well, people may be able to enjoy a great deal of psychological health and vigor; however, when work is not available and when it is a source of denigration, tedium, and despair, it can represent the bane of their existence.

The psychological study of working is now at a crucial juncture. The challenges that people face in nearly every sector of their working lives (work-based transitions, family-work balance, sexual harassment at work, racism at work, responding to globalization) are growing in complexity and impact. The next steps are to rally psychologists to understand the human costs of continuing to neglect or marginalize the study of working. Indeed, one of the intentions of this special section of the *American Psychologist* is to generate multispecialty research on the psychological study of working within psychology and to foster interdisciplinary scholarship on work and human behavior. We believe strongly that psychologists across the range of specialties need to be involved in the next generation of research, public policy advocacy, and social change efforts with respect to working. Moreover, we believe that our field needs to fully embrace the oft-cited comment by Freud (1930) that work and love are central to mental health. By helping to dignify natural human strivings for survival, relational connections, and self-determination, we will be increasingly effective in informing the public about the ways that societies can support their citizens to find meaningful and satisfying ways to earn their living and to connect to the broader social and economic contexts of their lives.

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