Theoretical Research Analysis: John Holland and his Vocational Theory.

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**Abstract**

Career counseling is a growing subset in the field of counseling and psychology. Career counseling emerged in the United States in the mid 1800’s and has changed dramatically since its emergence to include clearer definitions and inclusion of more resource’s and services. The field of career counseling emerged as an attempt to help youth identify work opportunities, and through the years it has found its way into the school guidance systems as well. The field of career counseling, also known as vocational counseling, has had many influences by theorists such as Carl Rogers, Erik Eriksson and Frank Parson’s, which have shaped its structure. One of the most influential theorists is John Holland and his theoretical concepts. This paper is an attempt to provide biographical history and theory synopsis on John Holland and his prestige works.

**Discussion**

 John Lewis Holland was born in the year 1919, in Omaha, Nebraska. His father was an English immigrant who was a successful advertising man in the United States. John Holland came from an intellectual and artistic family, where his mother was a teacher, his brother worked in the steel industry, and his sister was a pathology professor. John Holland, at an early stage in his life contemplated becoming a musician, but gave up on that dream when he began to feel as though other individuals had more talent than him. Before deciding to make psychology his career choice, and after giving up on music, John explored the field of life sciences, and even served in the army for 3 odd years after graduating from the Municipal University of Omaha. (Gottfredson and Johnstun, 2009). In an interview with Stephen Weinrach (1980), John Holland attributed the emergence of his theory to his military experience as an induction interviewer where he discovered that most people fall under a small number of types. John Holland attended the University of Minnesota after his time with the military to complete his graduate studies where he further strengthened his discovery that people are best seen in the form of types or personality traits. (Weinrach. 1980)

 John G. Darley, Holland’s adviser at the University of Minnesota, greatly helped Holland foster respect for the guidance and information that can be found in data collection. This became Holland’s approach to psychological problems. During John Holland’s graduate studies time, Herbert Feigl and Bill Alston played integral roles in the development of his theory as well. Feigl’s influence strengthened John Holland’s belief that data needs to be supported by theory and organization in order to be useful for interpretation. Bill Alston convinced Holland to clarify his theories and that proved to be useful because in 1973 John Holland’s version of his theory became clear and easily interpretable by counselors and psychologist who had no prior knowledge of his theory.

(Gottfredson and Johnstun, 2009). In 1969, John Holland joined John Hopkins University where his colleagues and him further tested and developed his theories one of which was a new vocational tool called the Self Directed Search (SDS).

 The primary focus of John Holland’s theory and research has been on why people choose careers and what the outcome of that choice is. This is different from other theorists in the field of psychology who often focused on the why and how of personality development. John Holland’s career choice theory attempts to match personality traits with the characteristics of work environments. In 1959, John Holland presented his theory of career choice. This theory proposed that individuals choose work, environment and situations that satisfy and match their personality. (Capuzzi and Stauffer, 2012).

“ Holland’s greatest contribution and his most well- renowned work pertain to his theory of vocational personalities and work environments.” (Nauta, 2010) The main ideas of Holland’s theory of personality can be broken down into three main points that are a) work and other environments differ and can be characterized in terms of typology, b) differences amongst individuals can be characterized in terms of typology and c) certain environments are better matched for some individuals and vice versa. (Gottfredson and Johnstun, 2009)

 According to John Holland’s theory, there are six main typologies or personality types, which are Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional and are shortened to form the acronym RIASEC. Interestingly, when John Holland’s theory first developed, RIASEC was considered to characterize environment types. Eventually, RIASEC characterized both environment and personality types. (Nauta, 2010) Individuals who like to do things characterize the Realistic type. They are good with active, hands-on, tool oriented work and view they are practical and mechanical. Individuals with this type often work as firefighters, mechanics, carpenters and technicians. The Investigative type describes those individuals who think about things. They are good at problem solving and in the field of science. They are precise in what they do and avoid tasks that don’t require thought. They often work as professors in history or philosophy, chemists or doctors. The Artistic type characterizes individuals as those who like to create things. They are drawn to creative activities and are good in the field of arts and music. They are expressive in personality and independent. Interior decorators, film editors, journalists, animators and artists are examples of occupations for the Artistic type. The Social type describes individuals who like to help and are good with taking care of people and helping them. Occupations for the Social type include psychologists, counselors, nurses, teachers and social workers. The Enterprising types are those individuals who are good at persuading others. They are good at leading, persuading and selling ideas and things. They view themselves as energetic and ambitious. Land developers, consultants; promoters, sales leaders and event coordinators are examples of occupations for the Enterprising type. Lastly, the Conventional type; which is characterized as individuals who pride themselves in organization. They are good with systematic processes, numbers, accounting and records. They view themselves are orderly and systematic. Individuals with the Conventional type often work as public accountants, curriculum writers and other clerical jobs. (Capuzzi and Stauffer, 2012)

A hexagonal diagram clearly depicts Holland’s six types with the idea that the types that are most similar are placed adjacent to each other and those least similar are placed furthest away. The hexagonal diagram is what gave way to the order of the RIASEC. (Capuzzi and Stauffer, 2012). Career Key, a career services website provides a visual diagram of Holland’s Hexagon:

Figure careerkey.org

The six personality types are often known as the Holland code, because they give us a three-letter combination of what the individual’s personality combination is. Assessments such as the SDS generate three dominant types based on the individuals input. For example, an individual can take the assessment and get a code of SAR, which is a combination of social, artistic and realistic, with social being the most dominant characteristic. (Capuzzi and Stauffer, 2012)

 Along with Holland’s well-known typology, he theorizes four constructs that help provide additional information on the individual’s type and choices. The four constructs are Congruence, Consistency, Differentiation and Identity. Congruence refers to the degree of fit between an individual’s personality type and their environment. Congruence is considered to be a determinant of important outcomes such as job satisfaction, performance and job stability. Consistency is the measure of overlap in an individuals score. For instance, if an individual has a SAI score, how consistent and closely related are their scores. Differentiation is the degree to which a person clearly reflects their scores. In other words, how different is the person from their score. Identity refers to the degree to which an individual as a clear picture of ones goals, interest and talents. (Nauta, 2010)

 Second to John Holland’s theory comes his role in the development of assessment instruments such as the Vocational Preference Inventory and more famously the Self- Directed Search. Both these assessments are geared toward assessing RIASEC personality types. Holland, in an interview, defined SDS as “ a practical self help device, a pair of booklets that helps a person summarize who they seem to be and explore some occupational alternatives. The SDS evolved over a long period of time, and the development of SDS was interwoven with the development of the typology.” (Weinrach, 1980). The SDS provided a transparent, user directed way for individuals to assess themselves in terms of Holland’s typology. (Gottfredson, 2009) John Holland viewed the SDS as an assessment instrument as well as a vocational intervention and referred to it as a ‘counseling simulation’. He believed that there aren’t enough counselors to provide direct services to individuals who need career guidance, and believed that the SDS could be used as an alternative. A series of tests conducted by John Holland and his colleagues, found the SDS to increase the occupation options individuals considered and reduce their concerns about career planning. (Gottfredson and Johnstun, 2009). The Self –Directed Search came to be used widely, while other test measures incorporated Holland’s RIASEC code into their assessments. For example, the Strong Interest Inventory. The Strong Interest Inventory (SII) is an assessment that measures interest, not skills or abilities. The results code individuals on six themes, which are the same as Holland’s code. I had the opportunity to take the SII and I got a score of ESC, which are Enterprising, Social and Conventional. The Strong Interest Inventory does not list the themes in order of RIASEC, but the themes are the same as well as the characteristics.

 Every theorist and their theories have strengths and weaknesses. John Holland’s theories are no different. One of the biggest strengths of John Holland’s theories is that individuals as well as counselors easily understand them. (Capuzzi and Stauffer, 2012) Holland’s RIASEC model is the most widely used model for organizing career interest assessments and is used to organize occupational information from many sources. The SDS has been used universally by a number of people, spreading over 25 different countries. The RIASEC type code has been integrated in a number of different assessment instruments, which go beyond John Holland’s own assessment tools. With the technology dependent generation, the RIASEC typology has also been incorporated into computer assisted career guidance programs such as DISCOVER and O\*NET. (Nauta, 2010) There are no doubt a lot of positive attributes to John Holland’s theory, which prove themselves in the widespread integration and use of his typology.

 The easiness of John Holland’s theory is a positive attribute, however, it is also a negative factor. The simplicity of the use and applicability of his typology opens the doorway to possible misuse of the results. (Capuzzi and Stauffer, 2012) John Holland in his own words stated that one of the biggest weaknesses of his theory lies in the formulation of stability and change. (Weinrach, 1980) Environmental factors, situational factors, economic status, psychological aspects and social factors can affect the way an individual perceives themselves and the way they answer assessments. This can cause variances in the results, and thus stability of results and typology is often questioned.

 As a future counselor, I believe that John Holland’s theory and typology can be a positive addition to counseling practices. However, I do feel that appropriate training and experience must be required, especially in the use of typology. John Holland’s RIASEC provides a understandable model that counselors can use with individuals with varying ages. John Holland is one of the major theorists in the field of career counseling, and I would respectfully integrate his theory. John Holland’s theory on career counseling is a simplified model to career counseling, however, it can be built on like many other theorists have been successful in doing so. I do not feel there is anything wrong with a little simplicity in this very complicated world.

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