

Foreword

Vocational behavior and counseling in today's world?

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Abstract

In this article, Rivas (1998, 2003) presents a critical analysis of vocational behavior and counseling in the present day, questioning many of the assumptions held until now. He underscores the role played by codetermining factors from the sociocultural context in earlier positionings. Acknowledging that the educational system is insufficiently involved in encouraging students' vocational development, he insists that guidance requires trained professionals. Here he highlights the lack of specific training for the guidance function as is shown by the parallel existence of several degree programs (Pedagogy, Psychology, School Psychology), at odds with one other, each claiming to provide professional training for use in counseling departments. He goes on to indicate from the research data the prevailing importance of psychogenesis in codetermination of effective vocational behavior, with sociogenic codeterminants taking a secondary role. Rivas advocates a new approach called vocational constructivism, including both the personal teaching/learning process as well as effective counseling involvement, qualified professionals being an obvious requirement. In summary, effective vocational behavior and counseling come back to their origins.

Key words: vocational behavior, codeterminants of vocational behavior, vocational psychology

It was no easy task to name this contribution to a monograph which addresses a topic that I have been working in for over thirty years. Once I discarded “taking stock”, “review”, “the state of the matter”, “prospects”, and similar terms I have written to on other occasions, I am finally inclined toward using a question to focus these thoughts, and perhaps, to bring the other terms up to date.

I use the question as a pretext for reflections which I make from within the context of Spain, with no pretension of conferring scientific validity or authority (whatever meaning one wishes to give these respectable concepts), nor do I claim to represent any type of consensus. To place into the interrogative two terms which are dear to me and so laboriously maintained and defended, both from conviction as well as from research-based rigor, does not necessarily imply skepticism nor does it call for a negative response to settle the matter, nor does it in the least suggest a frame of mind. What is behind this title is a questioning of many assumptions which I have held until now regarding vocational behavior and counseling; in applying them or updating them for *today's world*, a world we must consider “**new**” in terms of being current and different, I must ask the question.

In modern sociology, Alain Touraine recently published his work, “*A new paradigm for understanding today's world*”. Though I may differ with the use of some terms employed in his analysis (*modernity, paradigm, etc*), as a whole, I endorse the overall thesis: **today's world** has changed, and I add “very recently, and in our country, radically”, and one needs different clues in order to make sense of it. Indeed, the new *codetermining* factors from the sociocultural context which are affecting young people require that I necessarily question the viability of maintaining earlier approaches, even when they have been published not long ago.

The cross-cultural limitation is an inherent fact in Vocational Psychology: vocational behavior has a “here and now” explanation. This is where Strong once jested: “*It is unthinkable that a Sioux (from the 1930s, I clarify) would want to be a watchmaker*”. But in spite of the cultural relativity of our contributions, what is true is that we must rely on a certain stability in our environment in order to give meaning and projection to our efforts; and we have had such stability here, more or less, since there were enough advanced sociocultural reference points to gave us security for continuing in our work. But today, we perceive

change as generalized to all of us, to *today's world*, and even the more recent reference points have become useless.

Without going into detail, as a simple note, those of us living in the so-called *first world* (even if we became part of it just yesterday!), find it like *this*: economically globalized, informationally instantaneous and fleeting (*on line*), socially complex, culturally postmodern, diverse in coexistence, and educationally, stretched to the limit. The change cannot be treated as a crisis, but it must be described as radical, due to the speed and unpredictability with which it affects our beliefs and way of life.

The slogan from the Generation of '68, "*The future isn't what it used to be*", expresses creatively (that is, without any nostalgia) the situation in which we find ourselves. Former points of reference can hardly serve to effectively mobilize vocational behavior and counseling of school-age youth. And what is even more unsettling, we are ignorant of the keys to the approaching panorama, or better put, the panorama *which is already here*. The sociocultural context (in the full sense of its meaning) involves and affects propositions which have to do with *the reality* of vocational behavior and counseling, at the same time implying concepts loaded with projection into the future lives of adolescents. If I was always sure of and maintained the distinction between counseling and guidance, from the point of view of Psychology, today more than ever I reaffirm myself in avoiding the latter term: "*Guidance--toward what?*" In other words, the most that can be done is to accompany the young person, more than make proposals to him or her in the search for personal options.

The question in the title affects a large number of the eight *Notes on vocational behavior* which I have been working on as a research program. Postulates such as "*vocational behavior is part of the process of socialization of youth, ending in transition to the work world*", or "*the schooling of adolescents is the personal development mechanism which assures the process of transition to adult life*", I perceive today as much more limited in their explanatory strength (and I refer to what was written in the 90s!).

Indeed, in my opinion, it is becoming less relevant by the day that the main premise of vocational behavior as a socialization process for adult life should be the platform of *preparation* for the adult work world. The facts, as demonstrated by the data, speak for themselves. In the most recent survey on the educational system by the Ministry of Education and Culture,

“*Vocational Education*” is an aspect which both families and Secondary teachers give low value to, relegating it to the lowest priorities (in ranking, *ninth out of twelve*). Educational agents of one type and another consider school performance to be the answer to this question, and truthfully, the Spanish system continues to value this point of data exclusively (*How else can we consider the Cut-off Point for university admission, or the medical resident's score on the MIR, in order to choose a medical specialization?*).

For this reason, perhaps the *development* of vocational behavior is not an objective which appears explicitly in any of the Laws governing the Spanish educational system, and therefore, is not considered an important *psycho-educational activity* to devote resources to in educational practice (time, professionals, specific curriculum objectives, etc.) for effectively promoting the vocational development of each student. A little something is included, such as in homeroom classes, occasional informational sessions, guidance handouts, but these have only a remote possibility of being incorporated in the vocational development of the student who is “passing through” the educational system, and to a large extent, is indifferent to all of it. Adolescent pupils are oblivious to the **meaning** of scholastic learning with regard to their own vocational development, and can neither anticipate nor avoid the usefulness of their dedication and effort to their own future benefit. Scholastics have bad press, they are associated with imposition and even useless obligation. The individual's future success is attributed to outside factors, to luck, to position, to the unforeseen or to what comes up, therefore what matters is the immediate, what brings immediate well-being (*presentism*), and if possible, free of effort or precautions. And all this is being created right now in the cultural setting.

Many recent sociological studies on youth indicate clearly that professional practice or work is no longer an important reference point in their lives (we hear talk of the *decentralization* of the profession), and this downward tendency is accentuated in study after study. More importance is given to economic compensation or salary, an attribute which becomes a *quasi* absolute for assessing the prestige assigned to an individual or a profession, more than satisfaction in performing the tasks involved. The proposed binomials *training/employment* and *qualifications/social mobility* have been discarded some time ago, as can be seen in such newly coined expressions as “*mileuristas*” (from *mil*, thousand, plus *eur*, for euros), a term contributed by affected party themselves, young people in their upper thirties, with a university preparation well beyond the needs of the work they perform, and earning less than 1000 euros per month; or, the “*new poor*”, describing overly prepared youth (OPY) in the same age

range, with much higher educational levels than their parents, but who continue to rely on their parent's support and never reach the socio-economic status that they were raised in. *Upward social mobility*, which uses education as a lever, is in question. In the area of *personal development*, attaining the status of adult – requiring necessary functional independence for maturity – is delayed, leading us to redefine the classical developmental periods such as adolescence and youth, and new terms are coined which blur the stages, for example *emerging adulthood*, euphemizing its extension well into the thirties.

In any case, I continue to maintain that vocational behavior is a *dialectical relationship* between individual needs for personal fulfillment and social needs for productive and economic coverage. What I did not expect is that the *law of supply and demand* would be what inexorably resolves the confrontation. I did not expect to see that in **today's world** the production of goods, equipment, and services would be completely dislocalized on this globe, and *human resources* would know no boundaries for recruiting workers (both for physical and mental labor). Though it is far from original, I also point to present-day capitalism as the driving force behind this unbalanced joust: another note regarding the first world within the world of today.

One of the strong postulates from my field of study, which I continue to maintain, is that vocational behavior is a creation from individual factors (*psychogenic*) and sociocultural factors (*socio-genesis*), to which research would add individual *opportunity* made available from the environment; the latter turns out to be important in making a choice among vocational options. On one hand Vocational Psychology traditionally has given due diligence to the first type (*psychogenics*), with individual diagnoses of abilities, interests, personality, etc., with **counseling approaches** emerging such as *trait theory*, *psychodynamic*, *developmental*, *cognitive behavioral*, etc.. In recent decades, however, these have given way to the second type (socio-genics) which emphasize environmentally-interactive aspects such as social class, socioeconomic level, etc.; some psychosocial, sociocultural, or similar approaches half appeared, never becoming completed consolidated as approaches with directly applicable implications for individual counseling. And here again, as a function of research results and new theoretical contributions to Psychology, things have changed.

As a demonstration of this, my appreciation based on research with follow-on studies in our environment (secondary students who later are university students) leads me to claim

the following: results regarding the codetermination of *effective vocational behavior* verify that greater weight must be attributed to individual psychogenic factors--*Biodata, Persistence, Maturity, Development and Cognition*--with Opportunity following far behind, and to a much lesser extent, the scant participation of sociogenic factors: *initial family socioeducational and economic level*. And at the same time, zero influence from *counseling/guidance* received at secondary school. It can even be added that in these young students, clear opposition to the demands or concrete plans of parents or of the environment gave personal meaning to the overcoming of obstacles, as compared to those who did not face such challenges, and "made do with what was expected". One recent, newly emerging vocational construct in research is called "*Vocational identity*". Recent results show this to be a fruitful channel for inquiry. The foregoing indicates that – though far be it from me to follow the genetics-oriented current which is so strong in other areas of Psychology – the central explanatory core of *effective vocational behavior and development* lies in the individual himself or herself, and that external codetermination scarcely affects it, contrary to sociologizing positions or beliefs. Take note of the qualifier *effective* which accompanies results concerning vocational behavior; in my opinion this focuses the question. In other words, generic actions which are the same for all schoolchildren are not productive nor do they translate into effective individual behavior and development.

Another postulate maintained is that vocational behavior, development and counseling are effected through Teaching/Learning processes, implying *constructive* knowledge- and experience-related activities that are activated in the school context and in the environment where the adolescent lives, mediated by specialized professionals that are part of education at school. This has important repercussions. The Counseling Departments (how welcome was their arrival!) are overwhelmed with multiple functions and programs that are occasionally imposed (often the latest fad) and which they are obligated to attend to, leaving professional tasks of vocational counseling, in practice, non-existent. From the mouth of one dedicated practitioner, speaking at a conference before colleagues, came the lament that "*vocational counseling*" is a luxury that one cannot afford within the counselor's job.

Despite the well-worn use of the term **constructivism**, from within Vocational Psychology it is becoming an increasingly well-recognized, influential perspective in counseling, in all its shades of meaning. In essence this means that control of the subject's own representations, expectations and attributions, and of activity plans that he or she employs in order to

surpass or to follow a plan of action, all fall back on him or herself. The base is cognitive, the mobilization internal and individual/personal; little can be induced from outside, at the most there can be mediation, if there is an appeal for it from their maturity level, this maturity covering a very extended period of time.

The idea has many implications for the practice of counseling, which in order to be a help must be close to the concerns posed by the individual. It is known to me that, overall, the vast majority of adolescents are considered to be overlooked; this is not my idea. First and of necessity, the school community must become aware and sensitized, but even more unequivocally, we must know how to look after those who need it. The sociological realm offers today's young person descriptive information of the phenomena being studied, with their different nuances; these place the individual between two options that are never explicitly offered as being different: *subjectivism* and *alienation*, both with a touch of personal elaboration that democratic coexistence allows or requires. This subjectivization of individual behavior is an achievement which requires maturity sufficient to *find-one's-place-in-the-world*. Here counseling requires well trained professionals able to avoid prescribing options, as well as sufficient time as needed to help in the process of clarifying proposals that come from the students themselves. I understand **vocational constructivism** in these parameters, as an effective counseling approach for today.

The task of helping is increasingly more complex and difficult. In addition to what we have sketched out concerning today's world, we have serious limitations as professionals. On one hand the **Administration** does not pay attention to, or even ignores and does not reinforce individual efforts of vocational assistance practitioners to keep current (some practitioners have completed doctorates or masters on their own initiative), making it problematic for them to be able to effectively respond to the demands or to offer *effective* action. On the other hand, the lack of specific training for vocational counseling, combined with the coexistence of different, contrasting university degree programs and curricula (Pedagogy, Psychology, School Psychology) which all claim to provide professional training for use in Guidance Departments, does not favor clarification. And it does not help that the basic training which these university students receive is similar but with different approaches, methodology and techniques, while the Administration ratifies and even authorizes very different degree programs: I know of no other similar case in other public services such as Health or Justice. The question is not resolved by extending a few services over the length of the educational sys-

tem; for example, professional information (and not counseling) makes sense in *tertiary or university education*, but by no means is this adequate or sufficient in secondary education. Knowledge of professional options, the raw material of *Vocational information*, is an aspect to which abundant institutional and technological resources have been devoted for the purpose of covering the ongoing gap. But the truth is, due to its volatility – a reflection of the structural changes in the market – this information has hardly any usefulness for making plans at any range. And not to leave anything out, “Academia” (University Faculties and Departments) also fall short of the call, they continue “in their own thing”, disconnected from the needs of the educational system, offering a coexisting variety of different university curricula and degree programs (Pedagogy, Psychology, School Psychology) which all claim to provide professional training for use in Guidance Departments. Responsibility for this situation is not exclusive; for example, if in Spain there are no specific upper division programs regarding vocational counseling, as far as I know there has been no demand for it from outside.

In closing, counseling is more a solitary than a shared task in this environment where we work; I am convinced that we cannot help everyone (no matter how charitable they try to make us); it is enough to effectively help those who need it. Aware that I repeat myself, let me restate: the renewed challenge demands professionals who are trained and kept current, I deem these necessary, but there is also the demand for promoting a university degree program which is genuine professional development for the tasks to be performed, and the institutional obligation to require this, to facilitate it and to compensate it.

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December 2006

Note: This is the first time I have not quoted bibliographic references on which my text is supported. I do not believe they are necessary, but if anyone is interested, I will send them by e-mail. Francisco.Rivas@uv.es

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