In 1952, the editor of Occupations invited me to summarize [3] the theory of occupational choice that had been set forth by Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, and Herma in our recently published book, Occupational Choice: An Approach to a General Theory [6]. Now, two decades later, the editor of its successor journal has suggested that I reformulate our theory in light of the intervening research undertaken by the Conservation of Human Resources Project at Columbia University. The editor was alerted to the need for such a restatement by certain comments in my Foreword to Dale L. Hiestand's Changing Careers After 35 [9], which included the statement that, in contrast to my earlier view that saw the process of occupational choice as coming to a permanent closure when an individual begins to work in his early or middle 20's, I now believe that the choice process is coextensive with a person's working life; he may reopen the issue at any time. The editor appreciated that this was not a minor gloss, but, instead, pointed to a fundamental restatement of our earlier position.

**Review and revision of 1951 theory**

To set the stage for the general restatement outlined below, I will summarize the key elements in our original theory. There were three. Occupational choice, we said, is a decision-making process that extends from pre-puberty until the late teens or early 20's when the individual makes a definitive occupational commitment. Many educational and other preparatory and exploratory decisions along the way have the quality of irreversibility: A student who is pursuing a pre-law curriculum cannot suddenly shift tack and seek admission to medical school, for example. Thirdly, the resolution of the choice process always ends in a compromise, since the individual seeks to find an optimal fit between his interests, capacities, and values and the world of work.

"Process" reappraised. A first effort at restructuring must start with the statement made above that we no longer consider the process of occupational decision-making as limited to a decade; we now believe that the process is open-ended, that it can coexist with the individual's working life. Some men,
particularly those with professional or managerial backgrounds, often enter new fields after their retirement.

We came to this revised conclusion about the choice process as a result of our continuing research. Our original study focused primarily on young men from upper income homes who had time, money, and options with which to work out their choice problems—with the result that many ended up in professional careers. At that time we did not appreciate, as we did after our research into *Talent and Performance* [7], that even of those who enter a profession, sooner or later many move on into related and occasionally into different types of work.

A related factor that pushed us to reappraise the matter of timing was our research into the *Life Styles of Educated Women* [5] and other investigations that centered on the occupational choices and career development of women. These studies forced us to realize that the male model of preparation and choice followed by a clear-cut shift to full-time work and a career did not fit the female prototype. Many women interrupted their educational preparation for marriage, and their career development was frequently marked by shifts between work and home. Moreover, because the employment of their husbands took precedence over their own, many women modified their career objectives. In fact, we labeled two important types of educated women as “recasters” and “adapters”—see *Educated American Women: Self-Portraits* [8].

The Hiestand study also contributed to our deeper understanding of matters of timing. This study told us that many people who had decided on a career early in life and who had pursued it for a number of years—even decades—with marked success might, as a result of changes within themselves or within their work environment, seek a new career that held forth the promise of greater satisfactions.

If we were asked to identify the principal factors that lead to a lifelong dynamizing of the choice process, we would be inclined to stress the following three. The first and most important is the feedback mechanism that exists between a man’s original career choice and his work experience. If the satisfactions that he sought originally are not forthcoming, or if as a result of his working he becomes aware of new career possibilities that promise greater satisfactions, it is likely that he will endeavor to make a new choice. The probability of his venturing the attempt and succeeding in carrying it out will be affected by two related factors: (a) the degrees of freedom that he has as a result of changing family circumstances, i.e., if his children are grown and his savings allow him to take a year off to explore a new field; and (b) the pressures or options arising out of his job situation that force him to look for new employment or which enable him to accept early retirement.

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"Irreversibility" reversed. With respect to the second critical element of irreversibility, our later research underscored the need for modification. While we still feel that the multiple educational and occupational decisions that a young person makes between his childhood and his 21st or 25th year have a cumulative effect on his occupational prospects, we now feel that it is wrong to see these decisions as having an irreversible impact on his career.

There are several reasons why this facet of our theory must be revised. The first is the elongation of the preparatory process. Since 80 percent of the age group graduates from high school and since half of all graduates continue with their education and training, the decisions made prior to age 20 do not appear to have great potency, at least for the two out of five who have kept their broad options open.

To a lesser degree, the same is true of those who do not have the qualifications for or the interest in continuing their formal education or training after high school. Many of these young adults spend two to four years in military service during which their horizons are broadened; they acquire some skill, and, if honorably discharged, they are entitled to valuable benefits that will enable them to pursue specialized training. Others among this non-college population have an opportunity to enter one or another type of publicly supported training, as a result of which they are likely to reassess their occupational objectives.

Most important, we have come to recognize, largely as a result of the work of our colleague, Marcia Freedman, The Process of Work Establishment [2], that the career development of the noncollege group will be materially affected by whether or not they succeed in obtaining employment with a large company that has an internal labor market with training and promotional opportunities geared to seniority. If a young worker succeeds in joining such a work force, the key decisions about his career follow. The occupational decisions that he made earlier will be of relatively little significance.

Little is left of our original emphasis on irreversibility. The principal challenge that young people face during their teens is to develop a strategy that will keep their options open, at least to the extent of assuring their admission to college or getting a job with a preferred employer.

"Compromise" reconsidered. This brings us to a reconsideration of the third element of our original theory that held that the individual, in crystallizing his occupational choice, must compromise between his preferences and the constraints of the world of work. While we believe that no one ever makes an occupational choice that satisfies all of his principal needs and desires, therefore giving validity to the concept of compromise, we now believe that a more relevant formulation would be that of optimization. Men and women seek to find the best occupational fit between their changing desires and their changing circumstances. Their search is a continuing one. As long as they entertain the prospect of shifting their work and career, they must consider a new balance in which they weigh the punitive gains against the probable costs. Our studies of talented men, educated women, and career shifts after age 35 have persuaded us to move from the static concept of compromise to the dynamic counterpart of optimization.
The reformulation of our theory of occupational choice, then, follows in brief:

- **Occupational choice is a process that remains open as long as one makes and expects to make decisions about his work and career. In many instances, it is coterminous with his working life.**
- **While the successive decisions that a young person makes during the preparatory period will have a shaping influence on his later career, so will the continuing changes that he undergoes in work and life.**
- **People make decisions about jobs and careers with an aim of optimizing their satisfactions by finding the best possible fit between their priority needs and desires and the opportunities and constraints that they confront in the world of work.**

Our reformulated theory is that **occupational choice is a lifelong process of decision-making in which the individual seeks to find the optimal fit between his career preparation and goals and the realities of the world of work.**

The fact that a man remains in the same occupation does not imply that he has not altered his occupational choice. Consider the professor who, after being granted tenure, radically reduces his inputs into scholarly endeavors and looks to consulting or the golf course for his major satisfactions. Or the colonel who, passed over for promotion to brigadier general, spends his last four years in the service attempting to avoid trouble while he qualifies for retirement.

It is also true that many who make one or more radical changes in their organizational employment—the professor who leaves the campus to become a government administrator and who, after a few years, shifts again to a senior staff position in private enterprise—may be pursuing the same occupational goals. If, as we now believe, the process of occupational choice determination is lifelong, it is necessary to distinguish between the individual's latent and overt occupational behavior if the critical elements of continuity and change in his career development are to be isolated and evaluated.

Also important in this connection is the fact that the passage of time is a critically important factor. On the one hand, the passage of the years implies that the individual is undergoing important changes: He is accumulating skill and work experience; his interests and values are likely to shift; his personal and family circumstances will not remain the same. Moreover, prospective employers look differently at a young adult just out of school, at a man in his working prime, and at a middle-aged person who is entering the last third of his working life.

In the original version of our theory we paid little attention to these facts as we focused primarily on young men from middle and upper middle-income homes who were college-bound or college-educated. We had deliberately selected this group because it had a wide range of options based on family income, sex, intelligence, race, and educational opportunity. In the two intervening decades, our research was increasingly directed at disadvantaged populations—the undereducated, the ineffective soldier, Negroes,
women, low income groups—with the consequence that we became sensitive to the manner in which inequalities in income, malfunctioning institutions, and prejudice and discrimination reduce the options and increase the constraints that people face in making their occupational choice.

Constraints on occupational choice

We paid particular attention to the inhibiting, constraining, and often crippling role of dysfunctional institutions on the occupational choice of large segments of the population in our recently published book on Career Guidance [4]. Children born into low income families have relatively little prospect of developing and accomplishing an occupational goal that requires graduating from college or professional school. The exceptional person can make it, but the vast majority will be unable to surmount the multiple hurdles along the way.

Important as parental income is for broadening options for young people, we found that parental education and values—aside from income—are often constraining. We are impressed with the fact that many parents in relatively high-earning, blue-collar families fail to encourage their offspring to acquire more than a high school diploma. This, in turn, cuts them off from entrance into many professional occupations and careers.

Educational inadequacies. We are unsettled by our review of the widespread malfunctioning of the educational system. All too frequently young people from low income homes fail to develop interests, acquire skills, or formulate aspirations. Our summary conclusion is that the school, instead of liberating these youngsters from the adverse environment into which they have been born and brought up, operates so that at the end of their educational experience they are even more firmly entrapped.

We noted further that while considerable progress has been made in the lowering of discriminatory barriers in the world of work against women and minority groups, this progress is often not reflected in the educational system with respect to either curriculum or guidance. Consequently, a great many able young women, Negroes, and other minority group members are encouraged to pursue programs that will restrict their later career options. The school authorities are not keeping up with the changes in the marketplace, therefore contributing to faulty decision-making of many young people.

Linkages lacking. While we believe that a significant improvement in the occupational decision-making process, particularly for the less affluent members of the community, requires major reforms in the educational system, we concluded from our inquiries that, for this end, exclusive attention on the reform of the school is wrong. We reached this conclusion through our new understanding about the important role played by the individual's experiences in the world of work in an open-ended occupational decision-making process. Particularly important in our view are the linkages among institutions, such as between the different levels of the educational system, between high school and post-secondary training, between high school and the armed forces, between military and civilian careers, between home and work, be-
between hospitals and prisons and the labor market. As we sought to make clear in our new typology of career patterns [4], movements between and among these different sectors are the essence of adult work experience. Consequently if the transition from one sector to another is facilitated, there is less likelihood of slippage with waste of talent and personal frustration.

We were especially impressed with the marked elongation of the preparatory process. When Parsons wrote his pioneering book early in the century, he focused on the transition of young people who left school at the age of 12 or 14 to go to work. Increasingly, full-time commitment to the labor market occurs in the early or middle 20's after a young person has moved back and forth one or more times between school, the military, the civilian labor market, homemaking. Hence the importance of smoothing the pathways among these sectors.

The work of our colleague Ivar E. Berg, author of Education and Jobs: The Great Training Robbery [1], called attention to one of the deleterious consequences of faulty transitional mechanisms. While it is true that education is the open sesame to many prestigious occupations and careers, it is not necessarily true, as Berg's research makes clear, that the more education a man has, the better worker he will be. There is a marked difference between evaluating a man's educational background to determine that he has the basic knowledge required for his present or prospective assignment and a screening procedure that accepts those with the most education and rejects those with the least. Yet Berg found that many employers hurt themselves and inflict hardships on many poorly educated persons by confusing certification with performance.

Guidance gaps. Another type of malfunctioning that we identified in the arena of occupational decision-making relates to the quality of informational and other supportive services. On the basis of our three-year investigation we concluded that most of the information currently provided by governmental and private sources to help people in their occupational decision-making is too general to be of much value, and that the information they need about training and employment opportunities in their locale is not available. Lacking are assistance in such mundane matters as filling out a job application, training in how to conduct oneself during an employment interview, little or no information about how to assess current wages versus deferred benefits, and many other unexciting but relevant considerations in career decision-making.

We were also disturbed to find that the majority of all guidance counselors are employed in junior and senior high schools. Consequently, young adults who are still in the throes of making a career commitment, adult women returning to work, mature men seeking to change their employment, released patients and prisoners, and many others who could profit from job and career advice are hard pressed to find it. There appears to us to be a misallocation of guidance services, particularly because most high school counselors are engaged in appraising student programs, assisting students in filling out their applications for college, and acting on behalf of their principals in dealing with disciplinary cases.
Conclusion

The reformulation of our theory of occupational choice delineated in the first part of this essay grows out of our two decades of empirical research in manpower economics, much of which has been focused on the occupational problems of disadvantaged populations. This later effort helped us to realize that the model we used in our original investigation, that of a group with maximum options, could not support our subtitle—"An Approach to a General Theory." Consequently, our efforts have been to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the ways in which such critical reality factors as income, sex, and race—especially in their institutionalized forms—operate to constrict and limit the occupational choices of large numbers of the population.

While our original formulation was based on a developmental approach, our reformulated theory stands on sociopsychological formulations. We have sought to make room not only for the individual as the principal actor in the decision-making process but also for the reality factors, past and present, that set the parameters within which he must resolve his choice.

Our greater sensitivity to reality factors in our present formulation of a theory of occupational choice does not obscure our conviction that the individual remains the prime mover in the decision-making process. While young people who grow up in adverse circumstances have fewer effective options through which to shape their lives and careers, all people have some options and the majority has a great many.

The critical issue is whether or not they take advantage of the options. An option, however, can never be exploited without some cost. The crucial questions, therefore, are whether the individual has sufficiently clear objectives and goals and whether he is able and willing to put forth the effort to realize them. While many people would like to be rich or famous, only a few are willing to make the sacrifices required to accomplish this goal.

While inequalities based on sex, race, income, and intelligence are pervasive in American society of the 1970's, and while such inequalities, particularly in their pathological manifestations, have a crippling impact on the career and life choices of many people, the fact remains that most Americans have career options. The existence of options is a precondition for a successful resolution of one's occupational choice. But more than options is required. The individual must be willing to make the investment required to realize these options. Options that are not exercised might never have existed. People who do not seek to optimize their satisfactions from their work are unlikely to do so. Many apparently place priority on other goals.

REFERENCES


\[ \text{\textbf{Averse to Poetry?}} \]

Must the eager editor take
  
Reluctant readers to task
  for saying Nay

To the ever open option
  To pen a poetic concoction
  and saying Yea

To this counseling conundrum:
  Is guidance more truth than poetry?

\textit{EDONYMOUS}