

# Psychologists are encouraged to understand the role of work transitions across the lifespan

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## Rationale

Psychologists are encouraged to understand how individuals learn to make career decisions (Krieshok, Black & McKay, 2009), how they make transitions from school to school, school to work, work to non-paid roles (home care, unemployment, retirement), work to new paid work, and non-work to work (e.g., welfare-to-work, unemployment to employment, retirement to employment). Applied psychologists strive to understand factors involved in normal progressions in career development, as well as the disruptions that may happen during work transitions to better serve clients' mental health.

A number of researchers have found that vocational development begins in childhood and children's experiences influence later development (Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2005; Schultheiss, 2008). Hartung et al. (2005) reviewed research on children's vocational development and found that children as young as 3 to 5 years of age possess rudimentary knowledge about occupations, and this knowledge of occupations typically becomes more comprehensive and detailed as they age. Children's occupational aspirations, however, seem to be influenced by factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnic/racial differences (Schultheiss, 2008).

Staff, Messersmith and Schulenberg (2009) argued that the larger field of adolescent development has paid insufficient attention to work and career development during adolescence. Whereas in childhood, socialization for work often involves exploration and play related to different occupations, in adolescence, vocational development becomes progressively more complex, and contextual and environmental factors become increasingly more influential. Turner and Lapan (2005) documented the importance of career-development preparation in adolescence; specifically, they highlighted the need to facilitate adolescents' career related self-efficacy expectations and work readiness skills.

One of the major social contexts that influence adolescents' vocational development is their family (Whiston & Keller, 2004). Bordin (1994) suggested that one's vocational development, particularly career choice, is not simply a product of an individual's exposure to parents' occupations. Whiston and Keller (2004) noted that families greatly vary; however, they concluded that family structural variables, such as socioeconomic status and parental achievement tend to influence adolescents' career aspirations and expectations. They further found that higher occupational expectations are associated with a supportive family environment that entails high parental expectations for the

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adolescent. As noted in Guideline 4, other contextual factors, such as race/ethnicity, social class, gender and worldview also affect vocational development.

The interplay between vocation and human development continues through adolescence into adulthood. Adults' vocational development is also influenced by contextual factors and socialization within their working environment (Cohen-Scali, 2003). This process entails an individual's integration into the world of work and the crucial role of social interaction in the workplace. Fouad and Bynner (2008) discussed work transitions across the lifespan such as school to work, work to other work, work to non-work, and non-work to work. Based on the developmental perspective of Erikson (1963, 1968), Fouad and Bynner (2008) noted the importance of adulthood development as individuals negotiate the critical task of being generative during midlife. Involvement with work can facilitate or impair the developmental tasks of adult development and aging based on the developmental perspective of Erickson, (1963, 1968) Fouad and Bynner, (2008) and Smyer, Besen and Pitt-Catsouphes (2009).

Transitions from one type of work or work environment to another can also represent an important task in lifespan development. One common example is the transition made by those employed by the military, given that there are currently more than 20 million veterans in the United States (Rones, 2010). Young adult and midlife transitions are commonly encountered by military veterans who have concluded a period of enlistment or who are transitioning out of a lengthy military career. Their employment transition needs have some unique characteristics. For example, veterans without a college education are more likely to benefit from a broad range of career services than those with a college education, but both groups may need assistance with job placement (Boutin, 2011).

The employment needs of veterans are often complicated by mental and physical health concerns related to their service experiences (Cohen, Suri, Amick, & Yan, 2013; Davis, Pilkinton, Poddar, Blansett, Toscano & Parker, 2014), which may serve to delay their transition into civilian work. It is also important to recognize the work-relevant skills and strengths veterans bring to society. The general public often views returning veterans as being mentally unstable, violent, and as abusing substances (MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014), and veterans' attributes as potential employees may be overlooked. Psychologists can therefore be of service in working with veterans to emphasize the ways in which their military experience can translate into civilian work.

Psychologists are encouraged to also be aware of the transitions associated with moving to being an older worker and then moving from worker to retiree (Czaja & Sharit, 2009). It is estimated that by 2020, one-fourth of American workers will be 55 or older (Benz, Sedensky, Tompson, & Agiesta, 2013). Older workers who are looking for employment often find it difficult to secure new jobs. Not surprisingly, the prevalence of disabilities rises with age, which also influences employment

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opportunities (Burkhauser & Rovba, 2009). Nevertheless, many workers continue to work past the age of 65 because of financial necessity or by choice (Benz et al., 2013).

The transition to retirement can be an especially important period for many older adults, particularly those who strongly identified with their work and careers. According to Wang and Shi (2014) retirement is an individual's exit from the workforce, which accompanies decreased psychological commitment to and behavioral withdrawal from work. Although many post-retirees report satisfaction during this stage, research demonstrates increased morbidity and mortality risks post-retirement, including suicide (Bamia, Trichopoulou, Trichopoulos, 2008; Brockman, Muller, & Helmert, 2009; Qin, Agergo, Mortsen, 2003; Schneider et al., 2013). For most individuals, post-retirement activities such as bridge employment (Wang, 2007, Zhan et al. 2009), volunteer work (Dorfman & Douglas 2005, Kim & Feldman 2000), and leisure activities (Dorfman & Douglas 2005) are all beneficial to retirees' psychological well-being. For other individuals, particularly for those with strong career identities, more intensive retirement interventions may be necessary.

## **Applications**

Psychologists are encouraged to adopt a developmental perspective in helping their clients develop career decision-making skills and the ability to appropriately navigate work transitions through the life span. Psychologists are further encouraged to draw from both therapeutic and psychoeducational strategies to help children, adolescents, parents, and adult clients consider the emotional and psychological aspects of vocationally-relevant transitions.

Specific strategies may include:

1. Provide suggestions to parents regarding behaviors and intentions that produce positive career outcomes in children as well as provide them with psychoeducational consultation (Whiston & Keller, 2004).
2. Develop direct intervention programs to facilitate children's vocational development. At the elementary level, tasks should be discrete, concrete, and short when working with early elementary children, and may include field trips, career days, experience kits, personal portfolios, and exposure to a variety of workers and occupations. At later stages this may include expanding the variety of occupational role models to whom adolescents are exposed, providing concrete help in career decision making, and encouraging a variety of exploration activities (Young, Marshall, Valach, Domene, Graham, & Zaidman-Zait, 2011; Young, Valach, Ball, Paselukho, McLean, & Turkel, 2001).

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3. Include exploration of personally meaningful career options and foster vocational identity while attending to the broader social fabric, specifically the interaction of individual vocational development with cultural factors such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, social status, ability, veteran status, and geographic location (Fassinger, 2008; Kosine et al., 2008; MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014). Adolescents could be engaged in structured group activities and dialogues that focus on evaluating career concepts and exploring the meaning that students attribute to personal, social, and work-related constructs. Psychologists may also use biographies, exemplars in novels, jobs in the community, extracurricular activities, and school service projects as means of enhancing adolescents' vocational knowledge (Gysbers et al., 2009; Hartung & Taber, 2008; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2009; Savickas, 2005).
4. Psychologists may help adolescents, as well as adults, to explore life goals, personal strengths and weaknesses, family expectations, potential barriers, and goal setting related to work. Tasks for adolescents could include community service, job shadowing, co-ops, extern- and internships, and summer jobs as well as formal assessments related to interests, values, and personality (Gottfredson, 1981).
5. Psychologists who are helping adult clients with work-related issues are encouraged to consider the client holistically rather than focusing exclusively on vocational development (Richardson, 2012), and recognize the interplay of work and non-work roles. As noted in Guideline 6, economic factors have significantly changed individuals' career and work security and clients will often have to make a series of career decisions across the lifespan, some of which are significantly influenced by external factors.

**Content extracted from:** American Psychological Society. (2017). *Professional practice guidelines for integrating the role of work and career into psychological practice, Guideline 3.* <https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/role-work-career>