3 Understanding career theories and concepts

Students meet with employers at a UW-Madison career fair (UW-Madison 2012)

"What is a career?"

Before we consider the kinds of career choices that might serve you well, both in the college labor market and in rest of your life as a consumer, citizen, and community member, we should know just what we mean by the term "career."

The definition of this term is difficult precisely because "career" is an object of interest in so many different social science fields: "From psychological notions of how dispositional differences affect job adaptation, to sociological interpretations of role behavior in organizational settings, to economic views on how human capital accrues through education and experience" according to one expert (Arthur et al. 1989).

At the very least, we should probably define career as having something to do with an individual's relationship to work over time; but beyond this minimal requirement, there are several strikingly different metaphors we could invoke in order to understand the idea of a career:

- **Career as "fit."** This metaphor imagines career choice as a puzzle-solving or solution-finding exercise, where the qualities of a person must be carefully ascertained in order to slot that person into one of the many different careers available within a given society. This matching metaphor suggests that the qualities of person and career are ultimately knowable, relatively fixed, and instrumentally achievable through the proper application of some sort of systematic method. And the implicit value assumption is that there is only one best career outcome for which a person should strive (Pryor & Bright 2011).

- **Career as "identity."** This metaphor focuses not so much on choosing the perfect career, but on building a positive self-conception within whichever career one finds themselves in. In his book *The Mind at Work* (2004), Mark Rose invokes this idea of career when he reminds us, "most working men and women try to find meaning in what they do — through the activity of the work itself or through what their wages make possible outside of the workplace. This effort is testament to a remarkable strength of mind. People work within constraint — sometimes the inhumane control of the assembly line or the 'electronic sweatshop' — yet seek some expression of self, some agency, some small way of saying I am here."

- **Career as "journey."** This spatial metaphor for one's career is one of the most common: people choose "career paths," seek the "fast track," climb the "career ladder," or suffer on the "career plateau" (Inkson 2002). (Even L&S SuccessWorks uses the "journey" metaphor, as we saw in chapter 1!) A journey might imply positive values like discovery, serendipity, and progress. But it might also involve negative values like getting lost, getting stuck, or never getting there at all.

- **Career as "resource."** The career is a source of individual power within this metaphor, in the same way that workers themselves are conceptualized as powerful "human resources" within the modern corporation. According to Pryor and Bright (2011), "Essentially, the 'career' is a building block or an ingredient in the construction of wealth" — so the goal is to maximize and stabilize that career resource as soon as possible.

- **Career as "calling."** Finally, there is a long philosophical and theological tradition which considers career to be an expression of one's destiny, one's best capacity for doing good in the world, and one's best hope for bringing about self-actualization.

These five metaphors for the idea of "career" aren't mutually exclusive, of course. But they have each emerged in different measures during different

historical moments, as various actors from public education, private business, and academic research have developed different career-related practices and theories over the last century or so.

Even though careers can be considered from different perspectives, it might seem that **career planning** must be a straightforward process. One counselor describes it this way: "Career planning is the developmental, systematic process of (1) learning about yourself (for example, your interests, abilities, and values); (2) identifying occupations that correspond to your assessment of self; (3) exploring the occupations that you are considering; (4) selecting an occupation to pursue; (5) readying yourself for the job search process (résumé and application letter writing, job interview skill development, job finding techniques and strategy knowledge); and (6) securing satisfying employment" (Ballard 2002). (Again, these steps should remind you of the L&S SuccessWorks career journey from chapter 1.)

But hidden behind this apparently simple formula are quite a few normative (that is, value-laden) questions: What aspects of one's self are most important for career choices? What aspects of occupations are most important? And if the goal is "securing satisfying employment," then who decides what that even means — employment that is economically satisfying to the public? Functionally satisfying to the employer? Or personally and even existentially satisfying to the worker?
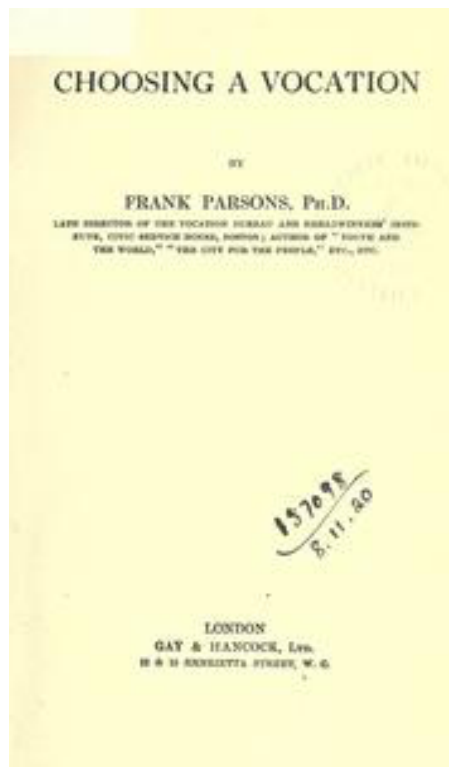
Throughout the social, economic and technological changes of the twentieth century — changes which have structured what kind of work is available, how it is valued, and who is expected to perform it — there have arisen several key theories about careers that answered these normative questions in different ways. It is worthwhile reviewing this history to understand the choices about career planning that we are weaving into this student guide.

Psychometric matching: Frank Parsons

Much of modern career counseling practice dates back to the turn of the twentieth century — especially the Progressive Era of social activism in the US, with its concerns about population change through rapid immigration and urbanization, economic change through new technologies of oil- and electricity-powered industrialization, and efforts to manage such changes through the newly-emerging authority of the engineering and social sciences disciplines (Collin & Young 2000).

Frank Parsons (1854-1908) was a former railroad engineer and engineering professor who lived during this period, and who came to believe near the end of his life that, especially for young and poor urban workers, "self-understanding in combination with knowledge of the world of work would result in sound career decision-making" (McMahon 2014).

CHOOSING A VOCATION

BY

FRANK PARSONS, Ph.D.

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TUTE, CIVIC SERVICE HOUSE, BOSTON; AUTHOR OF "YOUTH AND
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The approach that Parsons developed, outlined in his posthumously-published book *Choosing a Vocation* (1909) and put into practice at the Vocation Bureau in Boston, came to be known as the "trait and factor" method: "First, he stressed, a clear understanding of the individual's aptitudes, interests and limitations was necessary. Second, a knowledge of the requirements and conditions of different kinds of employment was essential. Finally, an ability to match these two would result in successful guidance" (Gothard 2001).

Such an approach fit into the then-new social science practice of **psychometrics**, or "the scientific study of human behavior through measurement" (Buckingham & Clifton 2001). Unfortunately, some of the "science" behind Parsons's own studies verged on quackery: "He wanted to know not only your personal ambitions, strengths and weaknesses, but also how often you bathed and whether you slept with the window open" according to one critic. Parsons even used the pseudoscience of phrenology — with its overtly racist assumptions about human potential based on physiological traits — in his counseling work (Krznaric 2012, p. 44).

*Phrenological table of traits matched with careers, early 20th. century*
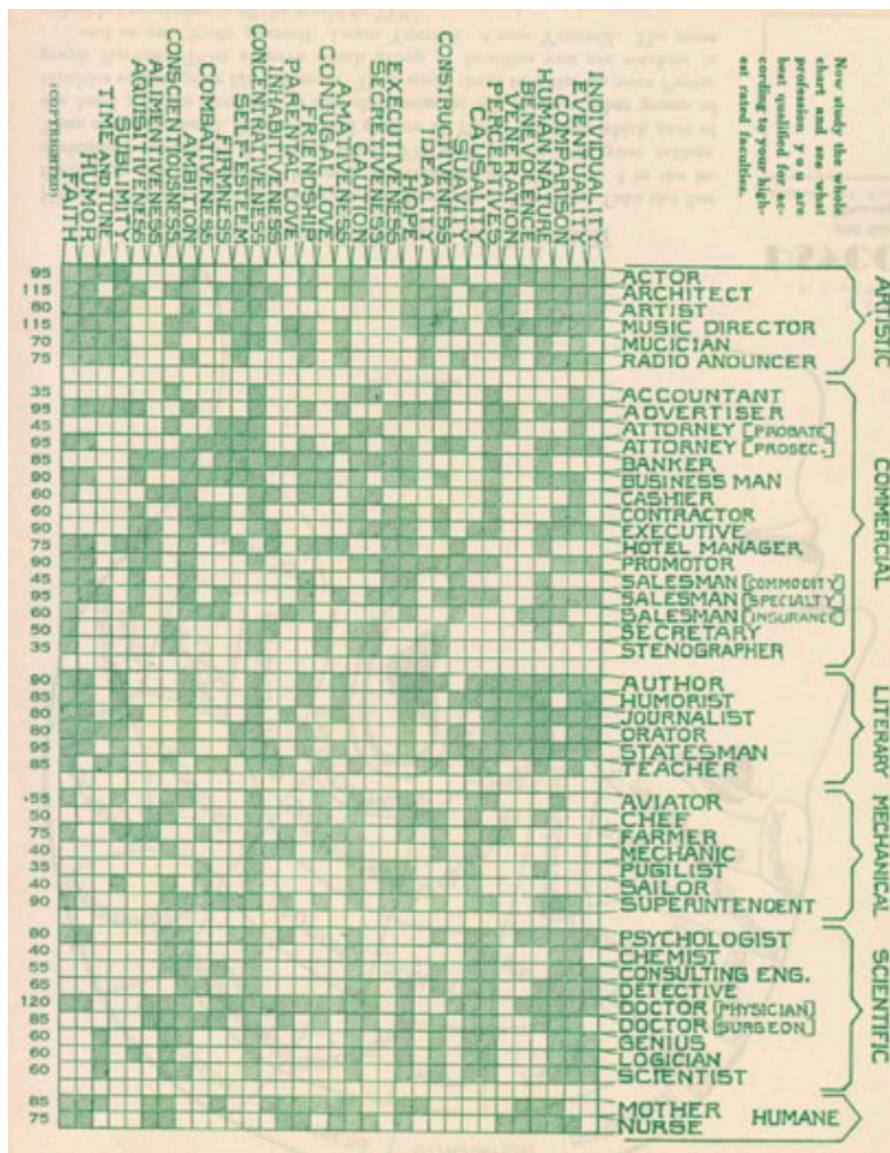
Even setting aside the profound prejudices and limitations surrounding its origins, it is important to remember that this kind of matching ideal was not only meant to benefit career-seeking individuals; it was also meant to benefit the new type of large-scale, national-scope, bureaucratic and technological organization which desired a precise division of labor at a minimum cost of wages and turnover (Betz et al. 1989). In normative terms, the Parsons understanding of "career" meant an efficient, productive, and permanent job match for both worker and employer.

Personality congruence: John Holland

Roughly half a century passed before the next major career counseling theory took hold — this one firmly rooted in the mid-century trends of psychology (Herr 1996). Rather than matching instrumental "traits" of people and "factors" of jobs, academic psychologist John Holland (1919-2008) looked more deeply at the overall personality types of job seekers, and the holistic work environments of different careers, arguing that "vocational satisfaction, stability, and achievement depend on the congruence between one's personality and the environment in which one works" (Betz et al 1989).

Holland's typology of personality types and work environments is summarized under what became known as the **Holland hexagon**. This model categorized individuals in one of six personality types: (1) realistic (related to outdoor and technical interests); (2) investigative (intellectual, scientific); (3) artistic (creative, expressive in literary, artistic, musical, or other areas); (4) social (interest in working with people); (5) enterprising (interest in persuasion, leadership); and (6) conventional (enjoyment of detail, computational activity, high degree of structure) (Betz et al 1989).

The "Holland Hexagon" of personality types
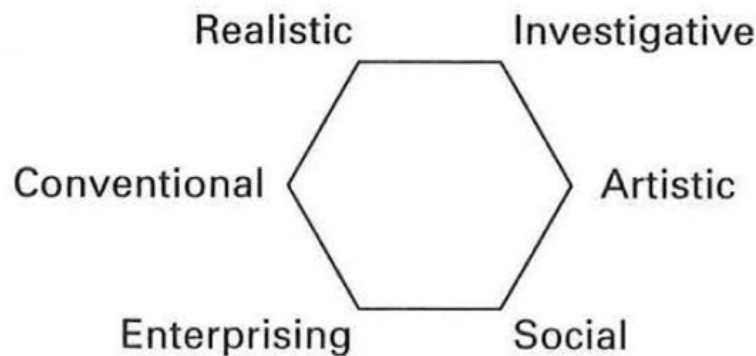
Holland believed "each is a model orientation based on coping mechanisms, psychological needs and motives, self-concepts, life history, vocational and educational goals, preferred occupational roles, aptitudes and intelligence" (Gothard 2001).

Importantly, rather than in the Parsonian "trait and factor" approach, where an outside expert scored a worker's traits using a supposedly objective set of measures, the instruments that Holland developed allowed workers to self-

report various aspects of their skills and preferences which would then reveal their personality type (Pryor & Bright 2011). However, once a person's position on the hexagon was revealed by this self-reporting, their personality type was still tightly connected to various kinds of suggested careers:

Holland Hexagon with sample careers for each facet

Sample careers Accountant, archivist, librarian, financial analyst, statistician, database administrator, auditor, web administrator, loan officer

Sample careers Civil engineer, museum conservator, airline pilot, fish and game warden, surveyor, electrician, musical instrument tuner, referee or sports official, restaurant cook

Conventional (or Organizer)

Realistic (or Doer)

Likes well-structured tasks, working with data; is responsible, detail-oriented, conscientious, compliant, careful, organized

Likes concrete over abstract problems, working outdoors with machines, tools, animals or plants; is physical, practical, hands-on

Enterprising (or Persuader)

Investigative (or Thinker)

Sample careers Chief executive, sales manager, real estate agent, securities and commodities trader, air traffic controller, sheriff, school administrator, lawyer, chef

Likes to lead, manage or influence others; is competitive, assertive, confident, outgoing, energetic, optimistic, ambitious

Likes to observe, research, analyze; is curious, reserved, logical, unconventional, explorative, scholarly, intellectual

Sample careers Surgeon, geneticist, molecular or cellular biologist, robotics engineer, intelligence analyst, transportation planner, archaeologist, historian, economist

Likes helping others, using interpersonal skills; is friendly, patient, responsible, caring, generous, cooperative

Likes unstructured challenges that call for creative solutions; is imaginative, intellectual, original, impulsive, expressive

Social (or Helper)

Artistic (or Creator)

Sample careers Nurse practitioner, teacher, dental hygienist, midwife, cleric, athletic trainer, substance abuse counselor, acupuncturist, arbitrator

Sample careers Architect, actor, singer, fashion designer, editor, video game designer, interior designer, poet, private cook

New York Times (2016)

Not only has Holland's work been the basis of many practical career-counseling instruments since the 1950s, it was also the first body of career theory to be questioned and tested through decades of academic social scientific study (Herr 1996). And in normative terms, Holland's hopes for "career" meant fulfilling, enjoyable work for each worker, and a coherent, particular style to each workplace. For these reasons, it has been widely influential for decades within career and vocational counseling.

*O*NET Interest Profiler using Holland's "Hexagon"*
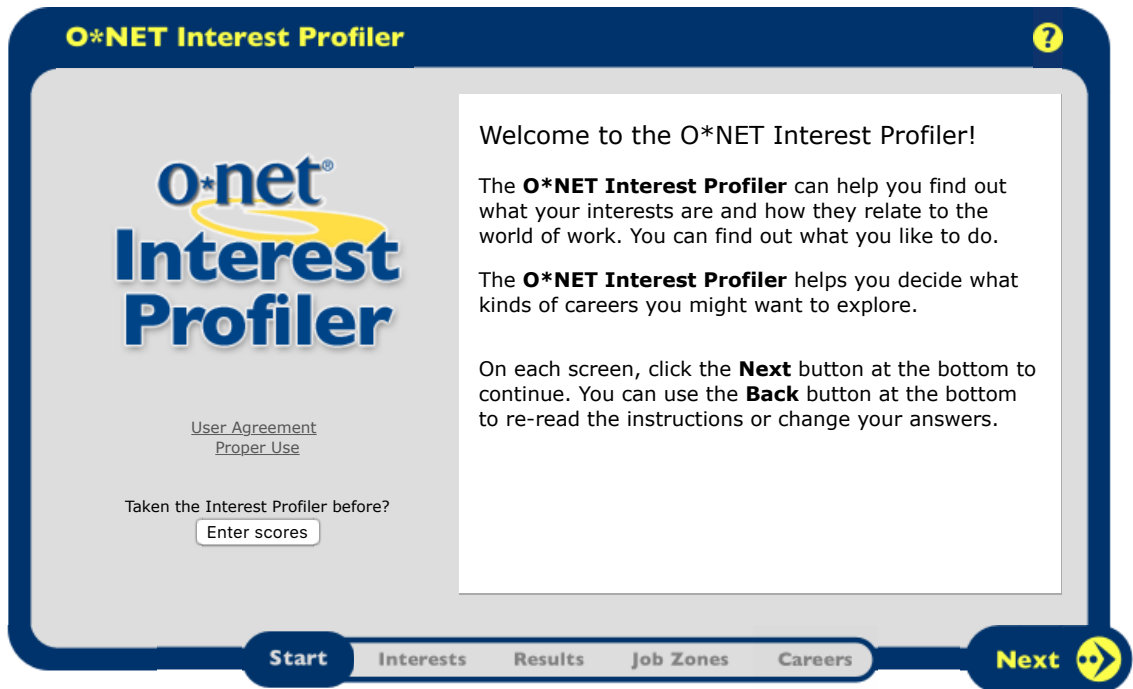
US Department of Labor (2016)

You can explore Holland's model yourself with a free, online career test that is available at the US Department of Labor "O*NET" site. It's called the "Interest Profiler" and it is at **http://www.mynextmove.org/explore/ip**

Developmental stages: Donald Super

Around the same time that Holland was expanding on the "trait and factor" work of Parsons by focusing on broader personality types and work environments, another scholar was extending the study of careers to consider not just the crisis moment of young adults seeking their first waged jobs, but the unfolding of career concerns over whole worker lifetimes. Psychologist Donald E. Super (1910-1994) expressed this developmental theory in *The Psychology of Careers* (1957): "individuals, as socialized organizers of their own experiences, choose occupations that allow them to function in a role consistent with a self-concept, and that the latter conception is a function of their developmental history" (Herr 1996).

Super's original model was expressed visually in what came to be known as a **career rainbow** of five life stages — growth (age 0-14); exploration (15-24); establishment (24-44); maintenance (44-64); and decline (65+) — conducted

within the environments of home, community, education and work (Gothard 2001). In this way, "Super is usually credited with shifting the focus of counselors and researchers alike away from 'occupations' to the concept of 'career'" (Pryor & Bright 2011).

*Donald Super's "career rainbow" of life stages*
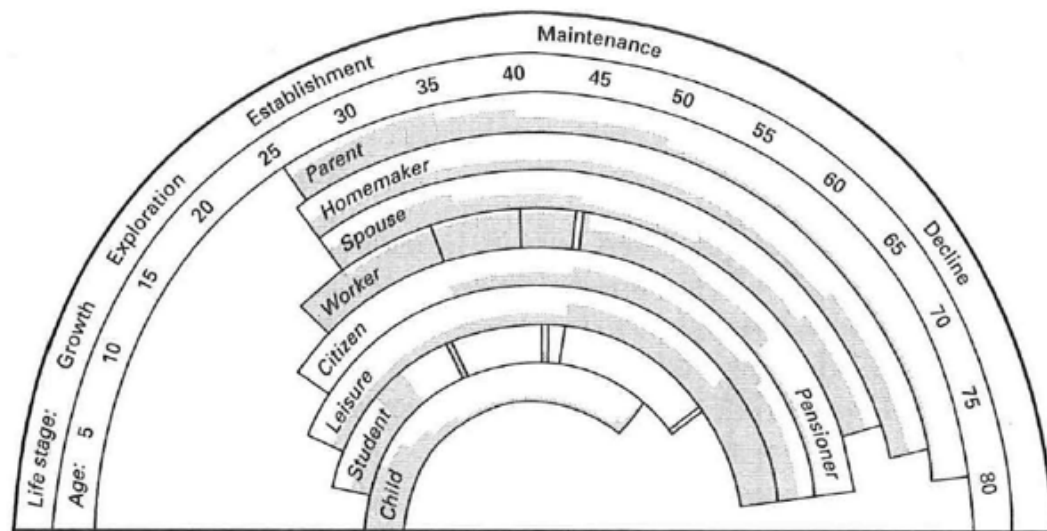
(n.d.)

Like Holland's "hexagon," Super's "rainbow" has been the subject of extended social science study; for example, "the Career Pattern Study, a longitudinal study of more than 100 men from the time they were in ninth grade until they were well into adulthood" (Herr 1996). In normative terms, Super's ideas cast "career" as a lifetime of gradual, progressive development of responsibility and reward. (Of course, the notion that roles such as "homemaker," "parent," and "decline" were ubiquitous and homogenous experiences for everyone, and at the same stages of life, demonstrated well the mainstream assumptions and prejudices of the era when the theory was developed.)

Constructivist stories: Mark Savickas

Holland's and Super's work — the "hexagon" of personality types and the "rainbow" of developmental stages — have grounded career counseling theory and practice for most of the latter half of the twentieth century. But starting in the 1970s and 1980s — especially with the changes in the globalization of the economy, the application of information technology to work, and the promotion of neoliberal political goals which reduced social benefits and

safety nets — workers found themselves facing increased global competition for labor, demands for greater flexibility in employment arrangements, renewed threats of replacement by automation, and an environment of more uncertainty in what were once assumed to be stable industries and career paths. At the same time, social science theories began to consider the ways that people, despite similarities in personality types, developmental stages, and environmental circumstances, could construct radically different meanings out of their work lives depending on their goals and values.

Mark Savickas's My Career Story *workbook*

MCS

MY CAREER STORY

*An Autobiographical Workbook for Life-Career Success*
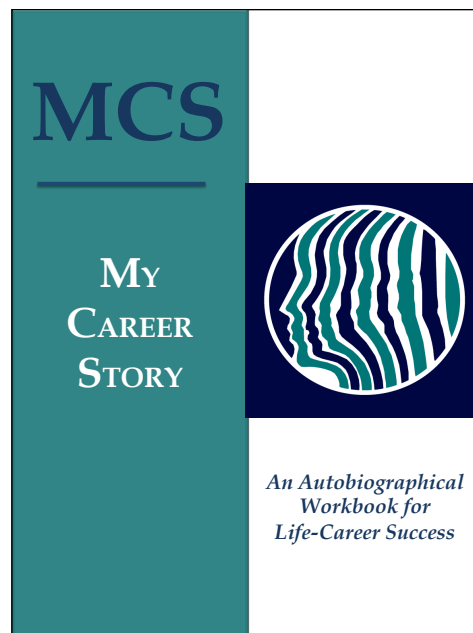
(2012)

It was in this context that health sciences professor Mark Savickas urged career counselors to move "**from scores to stories**," where "emphasis is placed on individuals' ability to construct their own careers by taking action to adapt themselves and what matters to them to the transitions of career development such as from education to work, from occupation to occupation, from work to non-work and from one job to another job. Thus career development is a process of progressive self-definition as individuals grow, develop, respond and change as they encounter the challenges of living and working" (Pryor & Bright 2011). In other words, Savickas argued that workers should not simply be tested and told where they fall in a personality or developmental schema, but instead they should be granted great power to define and redefine themselves as active, adaptable actors within their own career narratives (Brott 2011). The normative implications are clear: Careers

do not simply unfold, but rather, they are constructed by individuals by "imposing meaning on their vocational behavior and occupational experiences" (McMahon 2014).

Positive psychology: Donald Clifton

An assessment tool that we often used at SuccessWorks, the StrengthsFinder test, has connections to all of these theories. While at the root it may seem like a simple "trait and factor" tool, it attempts to draw lessons from more complicated and more developmental understandings of both persons and workplaces just as the "Holland hexagon" and the "Super rainbow" do. And using the StrengthsFinder tool to reframe and grow one's own career story, much as the constructivist theories argue, is encouraged. But unlike all of these theories, the StrengthsFinder is just as much rooted in norms of business success as it is in norms of employee satisfaction.

Donald Clifton's mass-market StrengthsFinder book
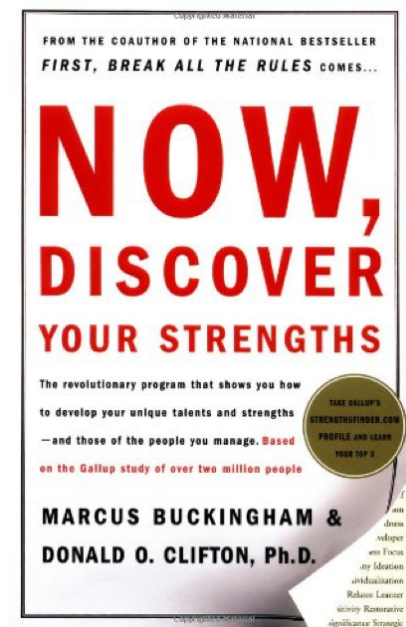
(2015)

Donald Clifton (1924-2003) was a professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the 1950s, during the same period that Holland and Super were first developing, publishing, and testing their career theories. But Clifton took a detour from academia to found a management consulting firm, Selection Research Inc., which grew so successful that by

1988 it had acquired the Gallup market research organization. It was in this context that StrengthsFinder developed, as Gallup explored "how can you create an entire organization where at least 45 percent of your employees […] strongly agree that they are using their strengths every day?" (Buckingham & Clifton 2001).

For roughly thirty years, Clifton's organization explored this question through various consulting contracts with private businesses, to eventually settle on the present-day StrengthsFinder assessment (Hodges & Clifton 2004). According to two advocates of the approach, "Clifton and his team of researchers at the Gallup Organization interviewed thousands of professionals with the aim of identifying the themes of talent that differentiated the top performers from the rest. Strengths were developed from one's innate talents, they argued, through the application of knowledge and skill" (Linley & Harrington 2006).

StrengthsFinder sample strengths

Achiever®	People especially talented in the Achiever theme have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive.
Activator®	People especially talented in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. Once a decision is made, they want to act quickly.
Adaptability®	People especially talented in the Adaptability theme prefer to "go with the flow." They tend to be "now" people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.
Analytical®	People especially talented in the Analytical theme search for reasons and causes. They have the ability to think about all the factors that might affect a situation.
Arranger®	People especially talented in the Arranger theme can organize, but they also have a flexibility that complements this ability. They like to figure out how all of the pieces and resources can be arranged for maximum productivity.

Gallup (2017)

The management advice that Gallup provided to human resources professionals was thus simple: building upon employee strengths mattered more than remedying employee weaknesses. "Since the greatest room for each person's growth is in the areas of his greatest strength, you should focus your training time and money on educating him about his strengths and figuring out ways to build on these strengths rather than on remedially trying to plug his 'skill gaps'" (Buckingham & Clifton 2001). This emphasis on steady self-improvement through the cultivation of core strengths is echoed across the management literature as a desirable quality of new employees. As Google executive Eric Schmidt put it, the tech world appreciates when "you

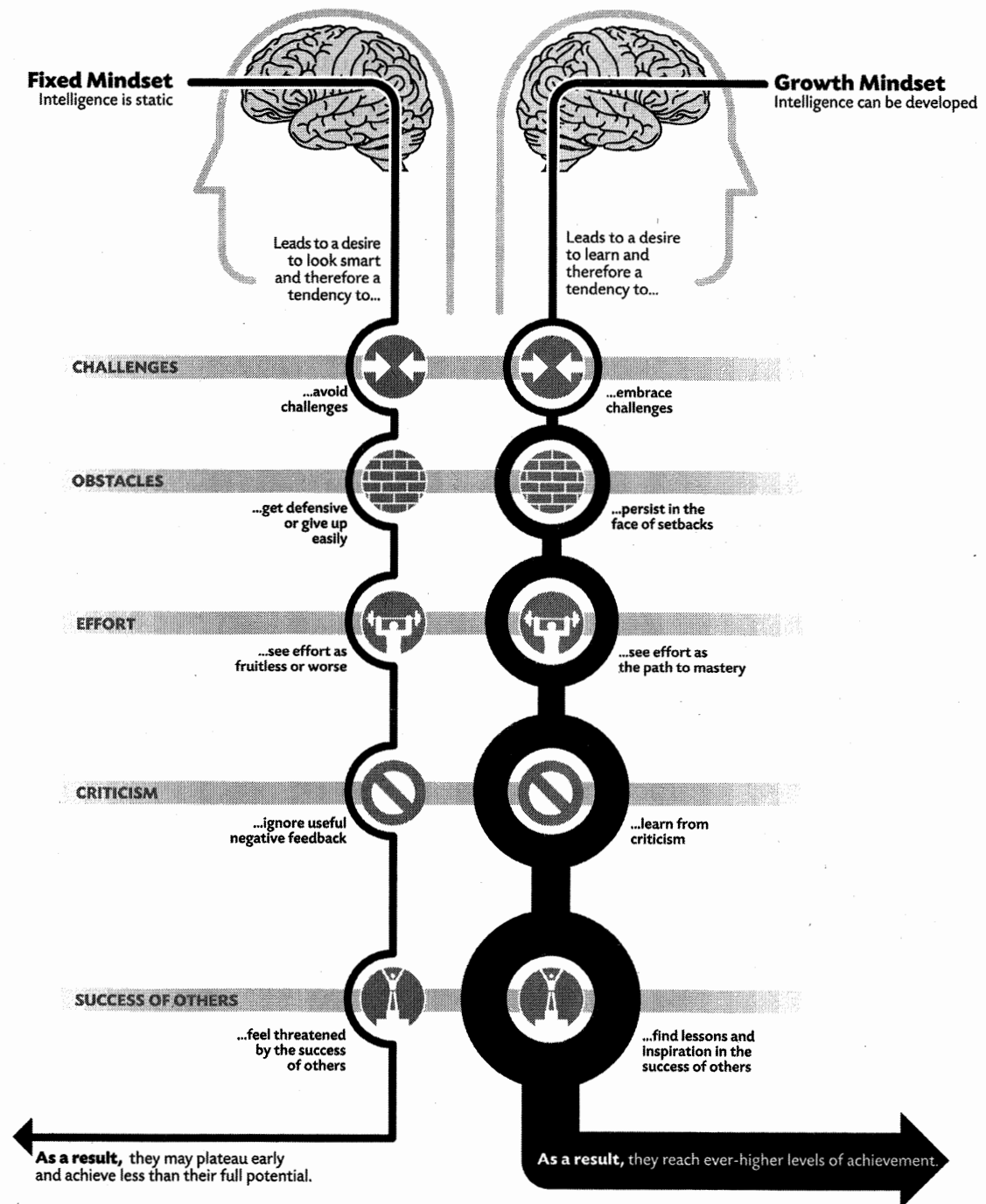believe the qualities that define you can be modified and cultivated through effort." (Schmidt et al 2014)

This attitude is what psychologist Carol Dweck has termed "**the growth mindset**." Here is how she explains it in her recent book (2006):

> This growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience.
>
> Do people with this mindset believe that anyone can be anything, that anyone with proper motivation or education can become Einstein or Beethoven? No, but they believe that a person's true potential is unknown (and unknowable); that it's impossible to foresee what can be accomplished with years of passion, toil, and training.

According to Dweck's research, avoiding the "fixed mindset" — "believing that your qualities are carved in stone" — actually allows us to better estimate, and thus improve, our own levels of performance and ability (Dweck 2006). As she points out, "In the fixed mindset, everything is about the outcome. If you fail—or if you're not the best—it's all been wasted. The growth mindset allows people to value what they're doing regardless of the outcome. They're tackling problems, charting new courses, working on important issues." (And that sounds a lot like a student who is taking full advantage of their college education.)

Differences between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset

Fixed Mindset
Intelligence is static

Growth Mindset
Intelligence can be developed

Leads to a desire to look smart and therefore a tendency to...

Leads to a desire to learn and therefore a tendency to...

CHALLENGES
...avoid challenges
...embrace challenges

OBSTACLES
...get defensive or give up easily
...persist in the face of setbacks

EFFORT
...see effort as fruitless or worse
...see effort as the path to mastery

CRITICISM
...ignore useful negative feedback
...learn from criticism

SUCCESS OF OTHERS
...feel threatened by the success of others
...find lessons and inspiration in the success of others

As a result, they may plateau early and achieve less than their full potential.

As a result, they reach ever-higher levels of achievement.

(Dweck 2016)

A self-administered test like StrengthsFinder is most valuable if you're willing to put yourself into this kind of growth mindset. Advocates of the test argue that it is meant to "help individuals form a language of success on which they are able to articulate what they do well" (Hodges & Clifton 2004; Buckingham & Clifton 2001). The strengths that result from this language are assumed to be not only "enduring and unique" (Buckingham & Clifton 2001) but also necessary to existential fulfillment: "Using our strengths comes naturally to us. We yearn to use our strengths, we feel fulfilled when we use our strengths, and we achieve our goals efficiently and effectively when we use our strengths" (Linley & Harrington 2006).

In this way the StrengthsFinder tool relates back to social science research by fitting into a recent movement toward **positive psychology**, or "the scientific study of optimal human functioning" (Hodges & Clifton 2004). Often said to have started with a 1998 speech by American Psychological Association president Martin E.P. Seligman, positive psychology was defined in contrast to mainstream (clinical) psychology, which allegedly "gives priority to negative behavior and various forms of dysfunctions" (Linley & Harrington 2006; Jorgensen & Nafstad 2004). Instead, its supporters argue, "Positive psychology takes as its starting point the individual as a socially and morally motivated being" (Jorgensen & Nafstad 2004). Thus the normative concept of a career under the "strengths" paradigm argues that both employee career success and organizational market success are better served when individual strengths are discovered, cultivated, and utilized as much as possible.

Critiquing the career development theories

One thing that should be apparent from this short overview of the history of career development theory is that there is still no discipline-wide agreement about the best path to career success — or even what such success would mean. Recent special issues of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2001) and the *Journal of Career Assessment* (2011) demonstrate that the "big questions" are still under debate (McMahon 2014). Scholars in the field say that "existing career theories should be seen as complementary ways of knowing, not competing and fully developed alternative explanations of the same behavioral set or population" (Herr 1996).

One reason for this lack of consensus is that key blind spots still exist, despite decades of interdisciplinary study of career strategies and outcomes. For example, too many theories and interventions assume the experience of an idealized white, male, middle-class employee as "normal": "A pervasive trend in critiques of career psychology relates to a perception that it is a Western white middle-class discipline that does not cater well to women and minority groups and may not translate well across countries and cultures" (McMahon

2014). The instruments developed to inventory skills, personality traits, and strengths of job-seekers might suffer from **test bias** where the language or examples presented on the test unintentionally hold different meanings for different social groups, affecting the results that the test provides (Worthington et al 2005). The efficiencies of university research are also part of the problem: "samples of convenience — for example, sophomore students in Psychology 102 getting extra credit for participating in a study — are inadequate to understand the problems of school leavers, non-college-bound populations, immigrant populations, persons of color, and women who are not college students" (Herr 1996).   Not only might the resulting career theories and instruments not apply in the same way across diverse populations, but their uncritical use might help reinforce or even reproduce negative stereotypes about those populations in the first place (Worthington et al 2005). (We'll explore the issues of stereotypes in the workplace and in the career search in more detail in chapter 9.)

Another critique of these theories is that no matter how broadly they might be based, they are biased toward finding a single solution to the problem of "career" that might in fact not really be solvable once and for all. In her intriguing book *How to be Everything*, Emily Wapnick (2017) argues that "The message that we must decide on a single identity is reinforced in many contexts. Mainstream career books and guidance counselors give us tests to help us whittle down our career options to the perfect fit. Colleges and universities ask us to declare a major. Employers sometimes ask applicants to explain ourselves when we possess skills in outside fields, implying we lack focus or ability. […] A specialized life is portrayed as the only path to success, and it's highly romanticized in our culture." What if, Wapnick wonders, many of us are actually complicated (and perhaps a bit contradictory) bundles of many different strengths, interests, and creative callings, who have the potential to pursue multiple and diverse careers over the course of our lives — what she terms a **multipotentialite**?

These critiques remind us that the world of work is constantly changing, so our career theories must adapt to explain these new realities. As one scholar of career counseling recently advised,"Career assessments and career information should be used as one source of information, among other sources, to help individuals construct their perceptions of themselves and their opportunities in an informed and careful way within their social context" (Sampson 2009).

In other words: Use these and other career-assessment tools with caution and care, recognizing their inherent and inevitable limitations.   In the next chapter we'll explore the practice of "critical reflection," which you can use to set your results from any of these career assessments into a broader context that takes into account the whole of your experiences, your accomplishments, and your goals for the future.

1. What are some of the different metaphors one might use to understand the meaning of a "career"? How do these different metaphors relate to different career exploration strategies?

2. What are the origins of today's theories about vocational and career counseling? What ideas from those origins persist today, and what ideas have fallen away over time?

3. What is the "Holland hexagon" and how is it used in career advising?

4. What does the phrase "from scores to stories" mean in the history of career advising techniques?

5. What theories and research results support the use of a "strengths based" approach to career guidance?

6. What are some of the most important critiques of past (and current) career development theories?

READ MORE ABOUT IT

Kim S. Cameron, Jane E. Dutton, and Robert E. Quinn, eds., *Positive Organizational Scholarship* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003). Talks about the historical origins of the StrengthsFinder quiz, and covers some of the research that has been done to test and validate this approach.

Bill Gothard, Phil Mignot, Marcus Offer and Melvyn Ruff, *Careers Guidance in Context* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2001). A general introduction to contemporary career counseling.

Roman Krznaric, *How to Find Fulfilling Work* (New York: Picador, 2012). This short essay on career values, masquerading as a how-to guide, considers five types of meaning on the job: earning money, achieving status, making a difference, following passions, and using talents.

P. Alex Linley and Stephen Joseph, eds., *Positive Psychology in Practice* (New York: John Wiley, 2004). A general introduction to the concept of positive psychology and its connections to career counseling.

Robert Pryor and Jim Bright, *The Chaos Theory of Careers* (New York: Routledge, 2011). This book describes the basic ideas behind career development theories of the twentieth century, to offer context for its own postmodern theory of career development.