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## **Social Justice: The Moral Imperative of Vocational Psychology**

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- Reactions

## **Social Justice: The Moral Imperative of Vocational Psychology**

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*In response to the article "An Emancipatory Communitarian Approach to Vocational Development Theory, Research, and Practice" by David Blustein, Ellen Hawley McWhirter, and Justin Perry, this author discusses the moral imperative of a social justice approach to vocational psychology. Planning for and directly addressing the inevitable and necessary resistance to change are critical components of social justice work. Implications for vocational psychology theory, research, and training are discussed, including the application of social cognitive career theory.*

In the formative years of vocational psychology, Frank Parsons articulated a commitment to providing career guidance for those most in need of assistance (Hartung & Blustein, 2002). Blustein, McWhirter, and Perry (2005 [this issue]) offer a useful framework for restoring vocational psychology to its roots and extend that earlier commitment to transform the institutional structures that hinder the ability of disenfranchised groups to utilize the social and economic resources available to others in the career development process.

Extending recent discussions of social justice and counseling psychology, Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]) present a psychology of working and a psychology of social change that extend beyond traditional notions and conceptualizations of vocational choice and development to include a meta-lens through which to reexamine these traditional theories, research, and practice in vocational psychology. The authors propose that through a social justice agenda, vocational psychology can fundamentally improve the academic and working lives of all individuals by altering the oppressive environmental conditions that directly and indirectly affect access to health, education, and subsequently stable work. Drawing from Prilleltensky's (1997) emancipatory communitarian (EC) approach to psychological discourse and action, Blustein et al. articulated a "fundamental process of personal reflection, collaboration, and activism" (p. 164) in vocational psychology.

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The EC perspective offers a process for considering how to recognize and change oppressive systems. The goal, from the perspective of Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]), is to create “a good society . . . in which all people have opportunities to work in safe, humane conditions with compensation that affords a sufficient standard of living” (p. 148). Through a particular set of values (e.g., collaboration and democratic participation and distributive justice) and assumptions (e.g., psychological practice focused on promoting a so-called good society), we can guide, evaluate, and advance our work with people and the social systems that affect their working lives. The authors also provide concrete examples of academic and career theory, research, and practice that implement aspects of a social justice agenda and, as in the case of Riley’s (1997) community work with children and families, succeed in creating systemic change.

In this reaction, I will highlight and expand several points discussed by Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]). In particular, I will extend the notion of vocational psychologists actively maintaining a shared responsibility for social change by emphasizing the moral aspects of this duty. I will also address the role of resistance to social change as an inevitable and necessary aspect of social reform. As Blustein et al. indicate, struggles are inevitable when working toward social change. These struggles and resistances can be internal as well as external. Recognizing and addressing how resistance to social change is a necessary and recoverable component of the process are essential to the successful implementation of an EC approach to vocational psychology. Throughout this reaction I will offer suggestions regarding the implications of the premise to social justice work in vocational psychology.

### GENERAL COMMENTS AND ELABORATION

Throughout their article, Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]) appear to call for vocational psychology to recognize its moral obligation to use its knowledge and skills (i.e., privilege) to address the vocational lives of all people and not just a privileged few. Morality can be described as “concern[ing] itself with action that is purposeful and for the good of all” (Peterson & González, 2005, p. 42). Wikipedia online encyclopedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>) defines a moral imperative as “an ethical responsibility . . . conduct or behavior judged as the right one, by a majority of people within a community.” Similarly, Webster online dictionary (<http://www.websterdictionary.org>) defines a moral obligation as “a duty which one owes, and which he [sic] ought to perform, but which he [sic] is not legally bound to fulfill.” Both definitions are consistent with the primary premise of the Major Contribution

that vocational psychology theory, research, and practice have moral ramifications. Consequently, addressing vocational issues requires a moral perspective and action. For example, Blustein et al. state that they “conceptualize the notion of social justice as a moral and dynamic process with other people and organizations” (p. 143) that should be “standard, normative, professionally responsible behavior, whether such behavior is in vocational theory, research, or practice” (p. 152). Furthermore, Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]) propose that an EC approach “can be used as an organizing moral framework of values and assumptions that naturally lend themselves to the prevailing schools of thought in vocational psychology, particularly feminist and multicultural paradigms articulated in the field” (p. 157).

In his examination of change in education reform movements, Fullan (1993) proposed that moral obligation and social advocacy must occur simultaneously. “Moral purpose without change agency is so much wishful valuing; change agency without moral purpose is change for the sake of change” (p. 66). This conceptualization of moral purpose and social change is consistent with the call of Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]) for closing the gap between talking about societal oppression and engaging in action to eradicate that oppression. This moral imperative is not often addressed in counseling psychology training programs. As mentioned by Blustein et al., counseling and vocational psychologists seem ambivalent about this aspect of our professional identity. Furthermore, those who enter doctoral programs with a strong sense of this moral obligation are often given little guidance regarding how to implement this social justice agenda or at worst are ostracized for being too political or too radical.

Admittedly, such a moral imperative can feel like an awesome responsibility to which the translation to social action and change may seem impossible to achieve. Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]) identify vocational psychologists as a privileged educated group who, because of that privilege, must engage in an ongoing process of critical consciousness to fulfill our moral imperative. With appropriate frameworks, resources, and skills (e.g., an EC approach), implementing social change is possible.

In her essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Lorde (1984) warned that when we possess identities that afford some privileges in a society marked by racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism, we may believe erroneously that we can dismantle the system without having to engage in a critical examination of the ways in which, consciously or unconsciously, overtly or covertly, we may conduct our social justice work in racist, sexist, heterosexist, or classist ways. Lorde’s words remind us that we must value the voices and actions of those affected by our social justice work by engaging in collaborative theory building, research,

and practice. Hence, the critical reflection process proposed by Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]; e.g., examining the underlying values and assumptions of who is served by, and the interests and agenda promoted by, our work) will facilitate a social justice agenda without inadvertently using the so-called master's tools. As Blustein et al. state, "reflection without action, and action without reflection, will lead to unproductive and divisive stalemates within vocational psychology with respect to social justice initiatives" (p. 169).

While possible and often desired, implementing social change is often met with overt and covert resistance. As humans, we simultaneously embrace and resist change (Evans, 1996). For example, when discussing issues of institutional and cultural oppression in my graduate courses, particularly multicultural counseling and career counseling, many students will readily agree that the discrimination and oppression that continue to exist in our society must change. However, when our discussions lead to a recognition that social change means dismantling and transforming the system by which we as educated individuals and our loved ones have advantage and privilege, students frequently stop and revert to individual-focused interventions based on presumptions of deficits existing within the individuals most disenfranchised by the system (e.g., improve self-efficacy or increase academic skills). This reversion frequently occurs during discussions of affirmative action where students who voice comments such as "Well, I had to work for what I have!" often focus on myths, misinterpretations, and misapplications (e.g., instances in which a presumed unqualified minority person receives an educational or occupational opportunity instead of a qualified White man) of a process designed to level the playing field in education and employment for women and people of color.

If we are to effectively train future counseling and vocational psychologists in social justice work, we must address the resistance to systemic change directly. Engaging students and trainees in personal reflections and analyses regarding ways in which they have privilege in this society, what they fear they may lose if the oppressive system is eradicated, and what they may gain with such a transformation could be a good starting point. Several authors (e.g., Evans, 1996; Ridley & Thompson, 1999) offer additional suggestions for conceptualizing and addressing resistance, showing us that resistance should be understood and respected if we are to fundamentally change and transform.

Evans (1996) argues that the primary factor in change is the meaning that implementers of change make of change. Change "provokes loss, challenges competence, creates confusion, and causes conflict" (p. 21). In addition, a disparity exists "between what change means to its authors and what it means to its targets" (p. 38). Evans reminds us to embrace resistance to change by

viewing it as natural and necessary component of the situation and not just another aspect of the problem. Like the characters in Spencer Johnson's (1998) best-selling book, *Who Moved My Cheese?*, we can facilitate change by identifying our individual responses to change, including the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that facilitate and hinder effort to change.

Evans (1996) describes five components or tasks of change that offer a useful addendum to the work of Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]): (a) unfreezing, (b) moving from loss to commitment, (c) moving from old competence to new competence, (d) moving from confusion to coherence, and (e) moving from conflict to consensus (p. 56). Vocational psychologists may recognize and facilitate the tasks of change within themselves as well as within clients, stakeholders, and policy-makers. By providing clear steps for recognizing resistance to change and how to transcend that resistance, Evans offers an additional perspective for vocational psychologists to consider as they implement an EC approach to vocational choice and development.

The first task of change, unfreezing, consists of increasing participants' fear of not trying and then reducing their fear of trying. Participants "must be sufficiently dissatisfied with the present state of affairs—and their role in maintaining it—or they have no reason to endure the losses and challenges of change" (Evans, 1996, p. 57). Psychological safety must be preserved while raising anxiety and guilt to levels appropriate to motivate participants to be willing to engage in social change (Evans, 1996). In the case of vocational psychologists, while we purport to develop theories that explain and facilitate the career choice and development of all individuals, as pointed out by Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]), most of our theories, research, and practice focus on a numerical minority of those most privileged within our society. The EC approach proposed in the Major Contribution can effectively reduce our fear of attempting to implement social change by providing a set of values and assumptions as well as mutual support from other vocational psychologists engaged in a social justice conceptualization and implementation of their work. However, first we must be sufficiently dissatisfied with the reality that our work is not improving the lives of those who lack resources and options for their working lives.

"Making change meaningful" is the central goal of moving from loss to commitment, the second task (Evans, 1996). This process begins by first acknowledging and providing support through personal contact for the grief and loss that people experience in response to change. Leaders of change must help participants see the connection between the past and future in their own time and their own way. For example, vocational psychologists can be helped to transform their professional identity to include some aspects of social justice work. Rather than setting mandatory standards for social justice

work, vocational psychologists can be encouraged to explore ways that integrate an EC approach to their current vocational psychology theory, research, or practice. Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]) provide an important step in this reflective process.

Moving from old competence to new competence, the third task includes developing new skills, beliefs, and ways of thinking through coherent, personal, and continuous training. During this task, one's core values are challenged (Evans, 1996) but must be respectfully addressed. This task can be achieved through the reflection described by Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]). Discussing and reading the works of others engaged in social justice work can be incorporated into vocational development, career counseling, multicultural counseling, and research methods courses as well as specialized courses in social justice in counseling psychology.

The goal of moving from confusion to coherence, the fourth task, encompasses realigning structures, functions, and roles by clarifying expectations and responsibilities, power and authority, and decision-making as well as the time and repetition needed to implement change (Evans, 1996). Leaders of change would need to address the uncertainty and confusion that arises during the early stages of institutional reform and hence should consider this task in the preplanning stages of change as well as from the point of view of the implementers of change. Even systematic collaboration among vocational psychologists, colleagues in other fields (e.g., community psychology, sociology, anthropology, or social work), and stakeholders can be confusing and frustrating. However, this can be mediated by beginning such collaborations with open dialogue about individual and mutual goals, agendas, and processes.

In the fifth task of change, moving from conflict to consensus, one must identify and engage a "critical mass" of supporters of the "right number of the right people" (Evans, 1996, p. 69), exert pressure, and appropriately use power. This task leads to the momentum that lessens the initial resistance. By integrating an EC approach to research and practice, vocational psychologists along with other members of the collaborative team can carefully select powerful decision-makers who can assist in implementing a social justice agenda.

Whether through collaboration and consultation with schools, government officials, and policy-makers or our own work within counseling psychology training programs, community agencies, or private practice, Evans's (1996) tasks of change can provide a useful framework for implementing an EC approach to vocational psychology. Understanding resistance to change is, ironically, necessary for the social change to proceed.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR VOCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY THEORY, RESEARCH, AND TRAINING

In addition to the above suggestions, vocational psychologists can take many avenues to implement an EC approach to social justice work. For instance, I agree with Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]) that vocational theories should be evaluated for their ability to consider the social and environmental factors that influence the vocational development of all individuals as well as for the ability of the theories to address directly the social and environmental structures that facilitate or impede access to occupational choice. The EC approach presented by the authors offers clear criteria for evaluation and subsequent revision of vocational theories.

For example, in psychopolitical validity, vocational research and practice are evaluated with regard to the extent to which systematic oppression is addressed and the extent to which that oppression is eliminated and prevented. The values and assumptions implicit in an EC approach provide a rubric through which the psychopolitical validity criteria can be applied.

Reexamining traditional theories of vocational psychology from an EC perspective, similar to the ways in which Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]) examine social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), would be a fundamental step in the application of psychopolitical validity evaluation criteria. Outlining the social justice implications of Holland's typology model (Holland, 1992), the theory of work adjustment (Dawis, 1996), Brown's values-based, holistic model (Brown, 1996), Super's lifespan, life-space theory (Super, 1990), Gottfredson's circumscription and compromise theory (Gottfredson, 1996), and cognitive information processing model (Peterson, Sampson, & Reardon, 1991) will provide a specific set of concepts that can be utilized when implementing these theories from an EC perspective.

The suggestion of Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]) regarding complementary quantitative and qualitative research methodologies that collaboratively involve stakeholders and participants should be seriously considered by vocational psychology researchers. Discovery-oriented methodologies of experience-near research (e.g., survival regression analysis and grounded theory approach) and theory development from the ground up and top down will give voice to both individuals and the system, thus enabling vocational psychologists to clearly understand the interaction between person and environment as it relates to our working lives. Editors of professional journals can encourage or even require researchers to discuss the social justice implications of their findings. In addition, the impact of one's research on social justice work could be considered in reappointment, promotion, and tenure deci-



sions, especially in those colleges and universities where social justice is integral to the institution's mission and focus.

Increasing social justice self-efficacy can be structured in advocacy training to include the following four sources consistent with social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994). Successful experiences implementing change within one's sphere of influence can be the most salient variable for facilitating positive social justice self-efficacy. Vicarious learning and modeling can be gleaned from the experiences of other agents for social change (Tatum, 1997). Social persuasion or verbal encouragement can consist of formal (e.g., conferences and sessions on vocational psychology and social change) and informal (e.g., regular gatherings with local colleagues) meetings in which social justice activities are shared. Addressing anxieties and fears as well as rewards and joys can influence the physiological reactions shown to give rise to self-efficacy beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, I believe that Blustein et al. (2005 [this issue]) contribute significantly to forging vocational psychology into a new era in which social justice once again becomes the forefront of social justice work. The EC approach offers a process by which vocational psychologists can fulfill their moral obligation to improve the process of vocational choice and development for all.

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