CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEXT

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Abstract
In reminiscence and appreciation of two decades of friendship and collaboration with Fred W. Vondracek the present chapter sketches the debate about the impact of contextual constraints vs. personal agency on individuals’ career development. It is suggested that scholars’ theoretical positions with regard to these two poles are influenced by their socio-historical context as well as their own biographical experiences. In a historical flashback, the major impact of Donald E. Super’s work in the 1960s and the 1970s is highlighted. He had coined the prevailing Zeitgeist in vocational psychology when Fred began his career in this academic domain. However, Super’s theorizing and work did not remain unchallenged. His strong emphasis on the self and personality was questioned by Walter S. Neff, a very creative spirit who has become almost forgotten in the field. In his 1968 book, one may find precise anticipations of social change phenomena as
well as precursors of modern dynamic systems notions applied to career development. The chapter finishes with a critical reflection on new concepts such as protean and boundaryless careers.

**Keywords:** Career development, personality, agency, context, history, Super, Neff.

**Introduction**

I met Fred W. Vondracek for the first time in 1995 during a student excursion of our department to several academic places in the U.S., and it was a most pleasant, welcoming, and hospitable professor that I met. Two years later, Fred visited our department for a couple of months. We were interested in predicting young peoples’ timing of consecutive steps in their career development. I had no expertise in the field of vocational psychology and was dependent on his theoretical background. Yet, from the very beginning he treated me as an equal and never tried to indoctrinate me. On the contrary, he insisted on me being the first author of our common product (Reitzle, Vondracek & Silbereisen, 1998) although he had contributed most of the substance. Over time, we got to know each other better, shared many views on psychology and the academic world in general and became friends. When I learned more about the field and could contribute a bit more substance to our discussions, it became clear that we both perceived career transitions as occurring in context. This insight was inevitable because we were mostly working on data of adolescents and young adults raised in the two different contexts of pre-unification Germany. My impression was that Fred always emphasized a bit more the new oppor-
tunities and almost unlimited options for agency of eastern young people after unification, whereas I was a bit more skeptical and stressed the market constraints which had replaced the former ideological oppression. Of course, the variety of potential pathways towards self-actualization had increased, but only in principle. There was also an increase in material insecurity and unpredictability of the future. Easterners were not socialized to cope with such a high degree of uncertainty. Consequently, context would have a crucial impact on their job-related as well as private transitions.

Context and Agency

Since the days in the Berlin Youth Longitudinal Study, I have always been skeptical towards individual agency as the primary driving force in human development, not because I believe in structural determinism, but more so because so many turns and decisions at junctions happen unconsciously, unplanned, or simply by chance. Insofar, I could subscribe to our basic doctrine of “development as action in context” when it was defined the following way: “In short, the action perspective of development is a useful fiction, a paradigm which helps to clarify and systematize basic concepts and methodologies ... we do not wish to imply that action aimed at development is always conscious, deliberate, or rational (Silbereisen & Eyferth, 1986, p. 5).” Fred often quoted the ideas of Ford and Lerner (1992). They aimed at uniting person and context in their Developmental Systems Theory. This meant finding a theoretically sound compromise between apparently incompatible positions which were illustratively outlined by Ford (1994):
“Sometimes people are seen as “pilots” of their lives – choosing the destinations toward which they will sail; choosing the means of getting there with some knowledge of the characteristics of their ship and the factors that influence it such as the force of the winds, the currents of life, and the availability of essential supplies ... Another view sees people as machines or “robots” responding automatically to events which impinge on them. In this view, the winds and currents of the sea of life carry a person’s ship wherever they may go. The nature of the design of the ship, the power of the currents, winds, and other forces to which it is subjected, determine its directions and movement (p. 10).“

I have never seen humans as will-less objects, neither of social structure nor of destiny. However, the numerous studies comparing easterners and westerners after unification demonstrated to me how powerfully structure can modulate human agency. For example, it has been lamented for decades in Western Germany that women with higher education have increasingly shunned motherhood and that reproduction has mainly been left to lower educational strata. After unification, this trend persisted in Western Germany. In the East, the contrary occurred: Motherhood among well-educated young females increased (Reitzle & Silbereisen, 1999). With their high qualifications, they maintained employment during the economic restructuring and thus could afford family formation. Due to the wide-spread childcare facilities inherited from the GDR, they were able to maintain their jobs and were not reliant on a male partner. Half of the women from lower educational tracks, instead, had to struggle with unemployment after unification (Reitzle & Vondracek, 2000) explaining their reluctance to family formation. The basic impression from our data that the post-unification east