CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEXT

Festschrift for Fred Vondracek
Abstract
The chapter describes the profound impact Fred Vondracek’s work on contexts and dynamics of vocational development had on the “Human development in times of social change”—research group lead by Rainer K. Silbereisen in Germany over the past 30 years. We discuss the most central findings of our research group against the backdrop of Fred Vondracek’s work, using examples of various interdisciplinary, large-scale research projects. For example, we discuss his influence, both in terms of his theorizing and empirical works, with regard to a) entrepreneurship research within our group invol...
ving psychologists and economists, b) work by a large research consortium examining how individuals negotiate work, family, and civic roles in times of recent social change in Germany and Poland, a project that involved psychologists, sociologists, and economists, and c) developmental research on the German reunification as a prime example of massive and rapid social change. We acknowledge Fred Vondracek’s role as an inspiring source. His creative mindset and great support for research and application in human development aim at a better world for young people struck by global social change. Keywords: social change, career development, entrepreneurship, civic engagement, context

Introduction

If I remember correctly, I (RKS) met Fred Vondracek for the first time during a visiting professorship I spent at the Pennsylvania State University, USA, in 1987/88. During my stay I was very much impressed by a man who had beaten the odds and developed from a young person in Germany with a degree as a professional tile setter to an immigrant and later naturalized citizen in the USA, who after having crossed the ocean attended college and completed a PhD, and when I met him had already been a Department Head at this university. For the notorious inflexibility of the German educational system at that time, this was an almost unbelievable career. I learned that his scientific interests were in vocational development and met some of his colleagues and mentors, but none of this had much to do with my own professional development and research interests – at least so I thought.
At that time I was still busy with studies on puberty on the one hand and youthful problem behavior on the other. This was due to the fact that since the early 1980s during my tenure as faculty at the Berlin University of Technology I had pursued a research program on substance use in youth. I also compared this problem behavior between German and Polish samples, and learned the lesson that one can only study such issues when they are embedded in the normative psychosocial development of young people. That I had included data on pubertal development in our survey was rather unusual at that time in Germany for a young scholar who, like most of his generation, believed in the power of the social context and the opportunities or constraints for healthy development emanating from there. The fact that I was able to compare samples from Berlin (West) and Warsaw (Poland) was in itself a message – at that time of the Cold War such collaborations between East and West were rather unusual, especially on such a sensitive topic.

I should add at this point that my own background was in lifespan developmental psychology, which I owed to people like the late Paul Baltes, with whom colleagues and I had established one of the first systematic doctoral fellowship programs in Germany on human development. Only when I was at Penn State did I learn about Fred’s book on “Career Development: A Life-Span Developmental Approach” (Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986).

After a most influential experience in the USA, in 1989 I had another encounter with Fred Vondracek, this time at my then academic home, the University of Giessen in Germany. Together with my colleague Eberhard Todt I had organized an
international conference. Todt was motivated to expand his contacts to international researchers on adolescence, especially on topics like interest development and values. I knew that Fred Vondracek could help with his expertise and contacts, so I remember suggesting inviting him for an extended guest visit. This experience was also relevant for the book based on the conference that in its title explicitly mentioned context – a term that became crucial in the future of our collaboration with Fred: “Adolescence in context: The interplay of family, school, peers, and work in adjustment” (Silbereisen & Todt, 1994).

The Giessen experience turned out to be very fruitful – Eberhard Todt not only had an academic interest in the development of interests in adolescence, and had authored widely received books on the topic in Germany, but was also the developer of a “Differential Interest Test,” and could look back on real-life experience in career counseling based on his approach and the DIT. This was obviously a stimulating exchange because Fred Vondracek’s interest in career development appeared to me also rooted in his personal experiences, and as I learned only then, he also had a background in clinical consulting, which he had done for years.

Joint Steps to New Heights

In the time before 1992, the year I moved from Giessen to the Pennsylvania State University to join the faculty of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, I was involved in two research projects that, unknown to me then, brought my contacts with Fred Vondracek to fruition. First, in Giessen we conducted interdisciplinary research on a particular group of immigrants to Germany, ethnic Germans (“Aussiedler”) from the former Soviet Union who as a diaspora group had resettled in Germany, the country their ancestors had left sometimes hundreds of years ago. This endeavor represented