ADULT LEARNER CAREER TRAJECTORIES: VOCATIONAL SELF-CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT IN CALWORKS COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Given the size of the adult student population and the student affairs focus on career development in traditional age students, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore career development and the vocational self-concept (VSC) in 48 California community college welfare-to-work students. Findings suggest the importance of congruence between student roles and other life roles – as well as the importance of sustained relationships with community college staff, as this was closely associated with VSC development. These sustained relationships are most beneficial when they help participants develop resistance strategies against messages that could damage their self-concepts. Theoretically, our findings call for differentiation between work and career, and show how VSC develops in some adult students, a process heretofore missing from the career literature. Knowing how students have been socialized to think about themselves, understanding if they can participate in career decision-making, and what their responsibilities in out-of-college contexts are is key to helping students find congruence and/or cope with incongruence stemming from balancing multiple life roles.

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Over their lifetimes, college graduates earn $550,000 more than students with only high school degrees (Pew Research Center, 2011). As gateways to social mobility and valuable sites for work preparation, colleges and universities provide vocational training and opportunities for students to discover their career interests and related abilities (Van Rooijen, 2011). Clarifying how college contributes to career development for adult students is especially important given that nearly 45% of college students are over the age of 24 (Rose, 2012). Although adult students are hoping to gain the same economic benefits as traditional-age students, they have a unique set of needs as many have family and work obligations and different life experiences. They are often pursuing higher education to expand job options and overcome, rather than prevent, economic difficulty. The size and needs of this population is underscored by the fact that 80% of community colleges report specific programs aimed at enrolling and supporting adult students (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Meléndez, Falcón, & Bivens, 2003). However, despite the large numbers of adult learners and importance of career and vocational preparation in postsecondary education, there is a significant lack of research and literature in student affairs relating to adult learner's career trajectories.

In this paper we examine how one group of low-income, adult, community college students developed vocational self-concepts and career aspirations during their time in college. Although career theories explain how students' interests, abilities, and social contexts contribute to their career path choices, the literature rests on data drawn from traditionally aged undergraduates at four-year residential institutions (Brown, 2002). Whether the research applies to non-traditional students who have spent years in the workforce prior to college remains unclear. Understanding adult students' career development contributes to career theory and should help student affairs professionals better serve adult students.

Literature Review

Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between satisfying, successful career decision-making, and self-evaluation of one's work-related interests and abilities (Leung, 2008; Weng & McElroy, 2009). The less people are able to evaluate their work interests and abilities, the more they will have difficulty identifying career aspirations (Tokar, Withrow, Hall, & Moradi, 2003; Weng & McElroy, 2009). This type of self-evaluation is in line with student outcome goals laid out in Learning Reconsidered 2 (Keeling, 2006). Komives and Schoper (2006) tied career development to students' inter- and intra-personal competence, which included students' abilities to understand and evaluate themselves, develop meaningful relationships, develop identity, set goals, and collaborate with diverse others. With respect to a career development outcome, "students will be able to describe their skills and interests and make appropriate choices of major and early career steps" (p. 24).

The focus on early career preparation and steps tied to campus resources (e.g., counseling, advising) without any mention of prior work (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002), suggests that the student affairs and career literature may lack attention to non-traditional paths to college and career development. Although all students can be prepared for work, a preparatory focus without consideration of diverse pre-college work histories is a shortcoming of the literature. Additionally, there is a significant lack of research and literature in student affairs relating to adult learner's career trajectories.

To these ends, next we describe our focal population – adult students enrolled in community college through CalWORKs – a welfare-to-work program in the California Community College system. Then we discuss career theory, its limitations, and the function of class in vocational self-concept

development.

CalWORKs

As part of California's welfare-to-work program, CalWORKs (California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids) aims to place welfare recipients in jobs and allows 40% of the population to pursue postsecondary education to meet mandated work requirements (Center for Women & Policy Studies, 2002; Mathur, Reichle, Strawn, & Wiseley, 2004). The CalWORKs community college program enrolls 55,000 students annually and covers 48 months in college, subsidized childcare, transportation, and work-study (CCCCO Data Mart, 2013). CalWORKs participants are required to fulfill state requirements of working 32 hours per week, and those that matriculate to the Community College meet these requirements through time spent at school while also working on-campus in student-worker positions (CCCO Data Mart, 2013; Nelson & Purnell, 2003). CalWORKs recipients matriculate into community college two ways: most are sent by county caseworkers after failing to secure work through the county job bank; the remaining thirty-five percent are already enrolled prior to applying for public assistance. Over 70% of CalWORKs students are 24 years of age or older (Nelson & Purnell, 2003), and are predominantly female (81.5%; California Budget Project, 2012).

CalWORKs students are all parents so their hopes for economic viability are closely tied to their family's needs. They often struggle to balance the responsibilities of CalWORKs, family, student, and work (CCCSO Portraits, 2006; Hays, 2004; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; London & Mauldon, 2006; Nelson & Purnell, 2003). Like other adult students, CalWORKs students typically enter college to increase their job options; however, exploring career-related interests and abilities may prove challenging due to welfare program requirements and family responsibilities.

To further complicate the career development process, CalWORKs students typically enter college having held multiple jobs but having had little choice in career paths. Previously held jobs are typically low-wage with few chances for autonomy since tasks are completely rote. Furthermore, students put in long hours in order to earn enough to survive (California Budget Project, 2012; Nelson & Purnell, 2003). Adults who have labored in these types of menial jobs are often left ill equipped for success in the broader labor market (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2006), because of strong socialization to understand work as a means to provide income for basic needs (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Levin, 2007).

Community college CalWORKs programs provide students with college counselors to help students transition from work to school and back to work, the college experience, and county welfare requirements. While these counselors are considered faculty, they serve on the student affairs side at the college and provide academic as well as career guidance.

Career Theory and Work

Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2002; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996) describes how people develop career interests and use education to explore and pursue occupational and career aspirations. People spend their lives learning vocational behaviors (e.g., work habits, skills, expectations) and developing ideas about themselves as workers and in careers. Before the age of thirteen children develop early vocational self-concepts (VSC)—evaluations of their personal attributes (i.e., interests, abilities, and personality traits) relevant to work (Savickas, 2002; Super, 1980). Through social interactions, education, and early internships or jobs, adolescents (ages 14-24) refine their VSC in relationship to available occupations and career aspirations (Super et al., 1996). This process of career exploration leads to VSC development to an extent that people are able to make choices about occupations and careers that reflect who

they want to be (Super, 1980). The degree to which VSC is developed therefore plays a mediating role in career-related outcomes (Tokar et al., 2003; Weng & McElroy, 2009).

Career Construction Theory also addresses how environments, experiences, and relationships figure into VSC development. The social context provides differential access to education, messages about available and appropriate careers, and resources that support career achievement based on class, race, and sex, amongst other demographic characteristics (Savickas, 2002). The broader social environment socializes individuals throughout their lives, shaping attitudes toward work and career. Given that CalWORKs recipients come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and have predominantly low-wage work experiences, there are multiple ways in which these students' home, school, and work environments may have impacted their VSC development.

The fact that VSC is one of many self-concepts that individuals develop throughout their lives further complicates career development for adult students. In addition to a worker role, people have life roles and corresponding self-concepts (Super, 1980) for all the roles they have (e.g., parent, partner, student). At any given time, two to three life roles are salient, and their related self-concepts mutually influence one another. Balancing competing life roles can be stressful if one aspect of self is fulfilled at the expense of another, and this stress impacts VSC development (Savickas, 2002). For example, if a student's salient life roles are mother and student, she must consider the values and goals of these self-concepts when making occupational choices. Although life role balance is relevant to CalWORKs students' career development, existing literature focuses on traditional trajectories where career exploration precedes the emergence of a salient worker role. Because most CalWORKs students have been workers prior to college, clarifying how their life role balance relates to VSC development is important to

understanding nontraditional, but increasingly common, career trajectories.

Work, vocation, and career. Career Construction Theory and related career theories (see Brown, 2002) do little to distinguish between the concepts of vocation, career, and work (Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry; 2005). When work is referenced, the career development literature usually limits the definition to adolescent or student employment that, along with other out-of-class activities, might inspire early habits, attitudes, and interests for future careers (Hamrick et al., 2002; Johnson & Mortimer, 2002; Komives & Schoper, 2006). Recent career literature recognized the limitations of traditional career theories when considering diverse life experiences and paths (Blustein, et al., 2005; Savickas, 2002); more specifically they recognize that the working poor often have limited choice in their work lives, also limiting the time or mental space to develop career-related ideas. However, beyond saying these divergent experiences exist and conducting intervention programs in high school, little has been done to explore how the working poor develop VSC and career aspirations.

For the purpose of this paper we define work as a series of jobs that are not pursued with any broader, long-term intentions. Work is done absent of consideration of any personal self-concepts or career aspirations and is purely labor to accomplish material goals (e.g. paying bills). In contrast, career refers to occupational choices made in response to developing VSC and balancing life roles (Super et al., 1996). Vocation refers to people's ideas about their goals, abilities, and interests related to playing the worker role. Distinguishing work as unrelated to career is important to studying how working separate from the pursuit of a career relates to VSC development.

Research Focus

Career research suggests that individuals come to college with a VSC, but un-

derstandings of CalWORKs students and the working poor suggests that high economic need may lead to working in ways that inhibit VSC development. Further, it is unclear how students with nontraditional career trajectories can be best supported to develop VSC and career outcomes (Keeling, 2006) by student affairs professionals. Given this, and the fact that the career research does not specify what VSC development entails for adults, we investigated two questions: (1) Do CalWORKs students enter community college with developed VSCs? If not, how do they develop a VSC? And (2) how does the community college function in students' VSC development?

Method

This was a qualitative, narrative interview study that used Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2002) in constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) with data from CalWORKs students to describe VSC development in this population. This design was appropriate given the scarce amount of research on CalWORKs students and vocational self-concept (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2012).

Sample

Participants (N = 48) were recruited from the CalWORKs office at a community college in Southern California. Participants selected the pseudonyms used throughout this paper. Participants were predominantly female (45) and claimed the following racial and ethnic identities: African American or Black (8), Asian or Pacific Islander (3), Latina (19), Middle Eastern (1), Mixed Race (2), Russian (1), and White (14). The average age of participants was 31 years old (range 20-54 years). On average, participants had two children (range 1-6). Most participants reported holding one to three jobs before starting college. Participants often fulfilled the state requirement to work 32 hours/week while receiving aid by working on campus in student-worker positions.

Data Collection

Data collection took place over the course of one academic year using a one-on-one, semi-structured interview format. The semi-structured nature allowed for commonality across the interviews in terms of stem questions while also providing flexibility to explore each participant's experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 2012). Demographic information was collected via survey.

The interview protocol was designed to elicit information about how and why students made meaning about work and careers in the ways that they did. Interviews were conducted by a four-member research team: two Asian American women and two White women. We began by asking about students' pathways to college and relationships between their college and career aspirations as well as career histories. To probe for details about students' VSC and work experiences, we asked about the types of occupations they pictured for themselves, the types of work they had seen family members do, and what their county caseworkers considered good career options for them. Finally, we probed for experiences and relationships that contributed to their career aspirations.

Data Analysis

Using constant comparative analysis (CCA; Strauss & Corbin, 1994) to identify commonalities between the data and the literature on VSC and life roles, the second author constructed the initial coding scheme. In consultation with the first author, the resulting codes were checked for trustworthiness against the data. To begin coding for research question one, we sorted participants into two mutually exclusive groups: "entered CalWORKs with a developed VSC", or "entered CalWORKS without a developed VSC." The transcripts from the latter group were analyzed using CCA to identity if and how VSC developed during participants' time as CalWORKs students. Emergent codes regarding VSC develop-

ment, relationships, and conditions under which VSC was or was not developed (e.g., congruence between student life role and other salient life roles, agency development in relationships) were applied to subsets of data until no further revisions were needed for the codes to capture the nuances in the data. The same process was employed with data from participants who entered with a VSC, in order to see if different or similar conditions were associated with VSC development. The final coding scheme was applied to all data using HyperRESEARCH 3.0.2. Axial coding was employed to examine relationships between codes (e.g., life role congruence and VSC development, resistance strategies and VSC development) to attempt to answer research question two. Using HyperRESEARCH's hypothesis testing function, we investigated the frequency of proposed thematic clusters in order to identify patterns regarding emerging relationships across and between codes (Patton, 2002).

In an effort to improve credibility and trustworthiness, the authors hand coded before utilizing the coding software in an effort to check intracoder reliability and ensure consistent coding over time (Creswell 2009; Patton 2002). The first three authors participated in the coding so that all transcripts were triple coded until high levels of intracoder reliability were achieved. Additionally, the authors engaged in peer debriefing with research colleagues and reviewed field notes during team meetings in an effort to synthesize themes that had developed.

Finally, identification of the subjectivities of the research team is important, given the impact they may have on data collection and analysis. The data-collection team was entirely comprised of women, and two members identified themselves as having previously been welfare recipients. Multiple members of the research team had also been previous community college students, and one author had previously worked at the data-collection site and had developed trusting relationships with several partici-

pants. These shared aspects of backgrounds between researchers and participants allowed for an insider perspective regarding the community college and the welfare system.

Findings

In light of the number of participants (n=29) who entered community college without a developed VSC, two major themes emerged from our analyses regarding VSC development in college: (1) congruence between participants' student role and other salient life roles supported VSC development; and (2) sustained relationships with community college professional staff. Within in the second theme, we found that relationships with student affairs staff, and counselors, helped to facilitated VSC development and helped participants develop strategies against negative messages.

Life Roles and Developing VSC

The majority of the participants (n=29) entered community college without a developed VSC. Their role as an employee/worker was salient, but they did not speak of career aspirations that suggested consideration of either component of career development Super et al. (1996) noted as significant: (1) consideration of their abilities or interests related to working, or (2) consideration of how their personality traits might align with particular careers.

Adults without VSC. Participants without a developed VSC described work in terms of labor and as a means to an economic end. Because of the immediate need to provide for their families, participants emphasized the importance of their employee/worker role at the expense of developing a VSC. Jackie explained how the long hours she worked just to be able to put food on the table meant that she "never stopped to think, 'I'm going to start to go to school [to get a better job].' There was not even a small ounce of energy left in my mind for that." Despite not thinking about career development, Jackie viewed herself positively

as a worker. "I'm comfortable and confident to…bring my ability to make things better to my work."

Although these participants had salient worker roles and could identify strengths in abilities or traits, when participants entered CalWORKs they had not translated these self-evaluations as workers into vocational self-concepts. Most important, however, to point out in this theme is that many participants without a VSC (n=21) did not know how to develop career aspirations. Linda said she "always wanted to have a career since I was young." She saw going to college as an opportunity "to get a career," but which career and how to get that career remained elusive. Consequently, participants' aspirations remained hopeful but vague. Jenni "wanted to try to pursue something in my life," and Trina wanted to "have some type of diploma." Adding to the challenge of identifying a career aspiration was that eight of the 29 participants entering without VSCs never believed they could have a career. Honey said she "didn't know I had options" when encouraged to pursue a career. Jackie did not feel like "I should be having a career," even though there was "a career that I kinda always thought about," she thought having a career was "unattainable" for her. Because of this orientation to careers, Jackie described being "really terrified" when she began college and was pushed to choose a career path.

Congruent life roles. The eighteen students who developed VSCs during college and their time in the CalWORKs program had salient life roles that were congruent with, and tied to, their student roles. They saw their student role and other life roles as related and complimentary to one another. For example, after having her child, Trina wanted to mature and "take care of business" by going to college. Trina's developing VSC represented her evaluation of the match between gerontology and her own abilities, traits, and interests.

I always wanna be around them [seniors]. And then I'm a loving person…I want to be a nurse. I want to work with geriatric – so elderly – and I want to be able to talk to them. You know you have to have a lot of patience to sit there and talk to them and feel their pain…I want to try to do everything I can for them.

Trina saw her personality and interests matching gerontological nursing demands. The congruence between all of her salient life roles – daughter, mother, and student—supported this VSC development. Being good at these roles required her to pursue relevant goals and activities: a career in caregiving, setting a positive example for others, and working hard:

You have to take your job serious – really take it serious. If you have a family, to think about your family…you want to be able to take care of your family…. You want to be able to feel that you're independent and that as a mother or even as a student - you know you want to show an example…You wanna show an example for your parents. You know what to let them feel good about something. You know that …you're successful in your job.

Being a good student allowed Trina to be a good daughter and mother. Further supporting the congruence between Trina's student and other salient life roles was the fact that her family supported her college and nursing aspirations: "They're so happy for me…. I'll always get support from them." Seeing relationships between salient life roles and having family support for school helped Trina explore how her abilities, interests, and traits aligned with particular careers.

Similarly, Jackie's salient life roles of mother, wife, and student were congruent; all of these roles and their associated contexts emphasized "the importance of getting an education." Jackie saw that her student role contributed positively to her mother role by enhancing her relationship with her children.

It's [going to college] had a really good impact on them [sons]. Like they're in college, I'm in college. My son actual-

ly comes here to Lakeshore. I actually carpool with my son….At first, I thought that was really odd, but I'm having like an adult relationship with my son. And at first, I thought, "Oh, he's not going to like it," but you know what? Really, it's a good thing. It's something positive.

Pursuing her career aspiration of being a "psych tech," Jackie felt her work toward this goal enhanced her other salient life roles. In turn, she was able to focus on balancing her older age, her family's economic needs, and her interests and strengths to consider why this was a good career for her. Jackie hoped to be a nurse, but she said that the wait list was "longer than two years," so in the meantime, she decided "to do the Psych Tech Program…I'm the older student here, so it's like a little bit more difficult…. and we're struggling financially." Jackie's revised plan allowed her to feel like she was en route to her nursing goal while continuing to fulfill her mother and wife roles.

Incongruent life roles. When students lacked congruence between life roles, developing a VSC was inhibited. Participants who had not developed VSC during their time in college and the CalWORKs program (n=11) often struggled with conflicts between their student role and other salient life roles.

For Botswanna, the most salient life role was being a Christian and that meant keeping her behaviors and beliefs in line with her religion. Although her student role was salient, she struggled to develop career aspirations. Botswanna desired success but continued to wait for God to tell her "what I think and how I feel." She explained that school required her to "put stuff in there" to decide who or what she wanted to be. But her role as a Christian conflicted with that approach because she felt she should "just be going with the flow" and that "I wouldn't be able to do all that because…everything is adding up to what He wants it to be because I don't believe that my destiny is mine, it's His. I don't believe my will is mine. It's His." Despite some congruence between her other salient life roles, the incongruence between her decision-making beliefs in her student role and other salient roles inhibited her development of VSC.

Ivy's most salient life roles were student and mother, although her mother role was unwanted and interfered with her student role. She seemed to be unable to make the two compatible:

I didn't want to have kids at all…Birth control didn't work. I used everything, damn it…I don't believe in abortion…. Kids are annoying, and my perception of children is still exactly the same…I feel like I don't have enough time to study because my kids need my attention. I'm passing my classes with barely C's, because there's not enough time for me to study.

Incongruence between her student and mother roles undermined Ivy's ability to think about a career: "There's so much stuff I just feel like, 'What if I don't make it?' I don't have a plan, so it's hard." Viewing her salient life roles as incompatible caused stress and appeared to preclude Ivy's ability to develop a plan that would lead toward a VSC.

Sustained Relationships and VSC Development

Whether initially developing VSCs, or continuing this development, participants reported sustained relationships with the community college's professional staff. (e.g., college student affairs staff, counselors, work-study supervisors) as influential because these relationships provided a supportive authority who could repeatedly and incrementally help them see themselves in new ways. There were two sub-themes that emerged in relation to sustained relationships and VSC development: (1) agency development; and (2) information provision. Additionally, another sub-theme emerged with relation to the specific relationship that community college CalWORKs counselors have in helping participants to resist negative messages or stereotypes about their

abilities or aspirations.

Agency development. In our study, the term agency refers to participants' beliefs about their own ability to make decisions affecting their lives. Sustained relationships with college student affairs staff (e.g., counselors, supervisors in other S.A. offices) helped students recognize their agency by showing them that they could direct their own career paths by learning how to evaluate their personal progress and success. Scarlette's academic counselor helped her recognize that her own interests could drive her major and career goals. The counselor modeled a procedure for career choice – comparing Scarlette's personal interests against career options.

> I would come crying to her [counselor]… and then she said, "What do you like to do?" And I was like, "I like the cop work. I like detectives. I like all that." And she was like, "Why don't you look at the criminal justice [major]?"…. I got into the classes and I was just getting straight A's.

By showing Scarlette that she had the power to change her academic program and work toward a related, interesting career, her counselor helped her see she had agency.

Helping students recognize their agency was critical to not just developing autonomy, but to helping students persist toward their aspirations. Before CalWORKs, Emily thought she "couldn't do anything." Through her relationship with her CalWORKs counselor[1] she began to see that career goals were for people who think, "I'll be able to do it." As a result, she learned that she controlled her own success and set a career goal that she felt best matched her interests and traits. Nursing was something she thought she could enjoy: "I want to follow the rules, but I also want the freedom to be able to like, you know, show my personality – whether it just means being just like nice

to them [patients] you know– make people feel comfortable being there." Her relationship with her counselor was the key to getting Emily to think differently about her own abilities and agency.

With respect to VSC, agency allowed participants to continue clarifying their strengths and interests, and to see that they could control their futures. Regularly "having somebody to talk to," helped Trina feel like she could "be successful in life." Reflecting on her relationship with her counselor, she shared that she had come to understand that "there's barriers that you've come through and some barriers that…. I'm still in the process of overcoming." These ongoing conversations with her counselor tied to her emerging VSC because they gave Trina the space to explore how "if you continue this path, this is how your life will be…or I could adjust here and transfer to here and be successful over here." Trina's story shows the links between recognizing personal agency, the role of college counseling relationships in that process, and developing an emerging VSC.

Career-related information and processes. Sustained relationships with college staff also provided participants with career information they used in developing their VSCs. Receiving career-related information gave participants more ways to determine what they thought they were good at as workers and clarify why certain careers might be strong fits for them. For example, the career information Jane received helped her find a career path that fit well with her interests in law enforcement. She knew about being a police officer, but thought it was too high-risk for her as a mother. Gaining information about other law enforcement careers helped Jane find a career that aligned with her own experiences and interests:

> I see everything – like how many kids get into trouble nowadays, and I have

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[1] Note that CalWORKs counselors at the community college are academic counselors but also advise student son their CalWORKs requirements. However, the counselors are employed by the community college and are considered counseling faculty with a specialization in CalWORKs.

kids of my own, and I'd like to be some sort of advocate for kids and keep them out of trouble. And I know that juvenile probation is setting them up for what's coming in their adulthood, and I want to keep them out of that trouble. So that's what's led me to this path.

Acquiring new content information about juvenile probation allowed Jane to develop a VSC that felt satisfying to her.

In addition to gaining more information about careers, participants described how sustained relationships helped them understand career decision-making processes that supported VSC development. Shelly described how her counselor worked with her to set up a plan and "laid out…this is what you can accomplish in this time frame. If you don't do this, this will happen. Or you can try this out.'" Her counselor helped her envision pathways to achieving her career which made Shelly feel like she "had a clear picture…. Oh I can do this!" Learning that achieving career goals is a process with multiple steps contributed to Shelly's VSC development.

Adriana's relationship with her campus work-study supervisor helped her "learn how to problem solve." Learning this valuable skill helped Adriana navigate not just work but also other contexts because she could see how the procedures were transferable. She remarked that learning these procedures "gave me the ability to know what I was capable of." Receiving more content information and decision-making processes helped participants acquire new abilities to use in their continued VSC development and career achievement.

Counseling relationships support resilient VSCs. Counselors were particularly effective when they helped participants resist negative messages or stereotypes about their abilities or aspirations, which sometimes would come from their CalWORKs county caseworkers. Counselors often modeled how to resist the ways caseworkers undermined participants' developing VSCs. Through regular exposure to these ideas, participants adopted more positive views of themselves, more positive views of their abilities, and more resilient VSCs.

When her counselor provided "self-esteem help," Honey's counselor helped her resist negative self-perceptions that she entered with that told her, "I wasn't valuable, that I was just like not doing nothing, and what's the point of life for me." Through her relationship with her counselor she said "Now I think of myself as a smart person. I'm trying to achieve my goal." Similarly, when Jane's counselor heard that her county caseworker was directing Jane toward medical billing and that she was not interested, the counselor "actually called them [county caseworker] and told them, 'She needs to be in a nursing program. She should not be in medical billing and coding.'" Her counselor modeled resistance by advising her, "You don't have to do that [the plan laid out by her county caseworker]," and asked her, "What do you want to do?" Together she and her counselor "changed from there." Jane's story is representative of several examples where counselors acted as allies and advocates, giving CalWORKs students skills to actively resist negative external pressures on their educational goals and vocational opportunities.

With her counselor, Sonia developed an argument for why she needed to resist her caseworker's push to "hurry up and get a job," rather than pursue her career goal. Sonia explained that if she left for whatever job was available, she would be left with minimum wage job options. Likewise she could not rush through school; "You can't just hurry up…and get a job like, you know, in that medical field….If I hurried up, like, and took all these classes – I won't do good in them, so then I won't get into the [radiology] program." With her counselor's guidance, Sonia was able to develop an argument for staying on track with her goals.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that the adult students in our study utilized similar supports, resources, and processes in

career finding and career development (e.g., counseling support, major exploration, on-campus employment) as traditionally aged students. However, the largest caveat here is that while these traditional resources appear to work for this group of adult-learners, the major difference is the challenge these students face in fighting against CalWORKs policies such as being approved only for vocational programs and certificates vs. transfer programs; "timing-out" of the CalWORKs program which means less fiscal support for childcare, tuition, and books, as well as less time to explore majors and career options.

Discussion

The findings of this study support and extend research on career development in two key ways: first, our findings identify an adult stage in the development of a vocational self-concept; and second, the findings identify policy as a context that practically and psychologically constrains VSC development.

Developing VSC as an Adult

Although most participants in our study entered college with salient worker roles, the need to work as a means for survival contributed to 29 participants entering college without developed VSCs. Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2002) claims that individuals develop their VSC during childhood and refine it during adolescence. Even though career theorists have recently recognized the need to include adults' work histories in career development, no studies have investigated what VSC development looks like when these individuals come to college after years of work. The findings of this study extend current knowledge of VSC development into an adult stage. Our findings challenge previous assumptions that childhood alone prompts children to identify abilities and career interests that they continue to develop before establishing a worker role. Instead, our findings suggest that having little choice in one's work life can

actually inhibit VSC from ever developing. Thus, it is important to distinguish between work and careers, and to approach adults with salient employee/worker roles without the assumption that they have necessarily developed VSCs. Another challenge here lies in the competing interest of programs such as CalWORKs which are policy driven and time limited. This policy challenge, among others, will be further discussed in the following section.

The function of life role congruence on VSC development during college is in line with career theory claims that balancing competing life roles contributes to a sense of stability and supports VSC development (Savickas, 2002). For adult students entering college without VSCs, helping them find congruence between their student and other life roles may provide them the stability necessary to develop a VSC.

Relatedly, our findings suggest that if students enter college without VSCs, catalyzing such development may first require agency development. As a consequence of socialization to understand work as a means to an end rather than a career, and without relationships that highlight their abilities, adult students—like our participants—may not believe they have the right or ability to participate in their career decision-making. Although Career Construction Theory describes the importance of role modeling vocational behaviors and decision-making strategies (Savickas, 2002), before our participants could benefit from such modeling, they first needed to see that they could play a role in setting and achieving their own career goals.

Policy and Resistance

Career Construction Theory describes how society and institutions shape life roles (Savickas, 2002). Our findings demonstrate that policy—in this case enforced primarily by county caseworkers—practically and psychologically inhibited VSC development for our participants. County caseworkers often reinforced worker role salience over VSC

development by pushing workers to meet work requirements without regard for students' abilities, talents, or interests. This is, of course, mandated by the welfare-to-work policy and the encouragement of "gainful" employment vs. career development. Colleges, on the other hand, emphasized developing students' career goals and related self-concepts as key to job acquisition and satisfaction. In many ways, gainful employment and career development are very different things with severe implications for long-term economic and social mobility. In the case of students enrolled in CalWORKs programs, they are indeed at odds with one another. Given that there are very few existing CalWORKs programs at four-year universities is a testament to this fact. Thus, policy is a key social context of career development for some students. Without counselors supporting resistance strategies, participants were left alone to maintain any developed VSC, and/or cope with the incongruence between the values of their policy and social services contexts, and the values of their college context. The development of stronger community college CalWORKs counselor to county CalWORKs worker relationships could prove beneficial to meeting the needs of the student, the college, and the county. Community colleges need to work as a system to inform state and federal policies such as CalWORKs, and support the promotion of transfer for students, which would lead to longer-term economic benefits for the student and the state/federal system. Additionally, counselor-worker relationships could benefit the student meeting requirements while also being allowed to explore career options and development of a VSC.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

Despite the contributions of our findings, there are some limitations of note. Our participants came from one CalWORKs office at a Southern California community college. While our sample was representative of the overall CalWORKs population, the applicability of our findings to other adult students is unclear. A broader sample and a real-time, multi-year design would further substantiate our findings. Including other non-traditional adult students on different campuses and at four-year institutions would add to our understanding of VSC development in adult students. Additionally, investigation into the influence of state job training policies on adult students' career aspirations would provide insight into how policies serve as career development contexts. Finally, further research into CalWORKs students who managed to successfully transfer to four-year institutions and their career goals and VSCs would provide additional exploration into the role of support provided by student affairs professionals in those contexts.

Implications for Practice

Community college career counselors, academic advisors, and professionals affiliated with programs for non-traditional, adult students should consider how they provide students with practical information and steps that can help students make career choices aligned with who they are and what they want. Beyond career inventories and descriptions of majors, providing information about what careers and majors entail, and providing groupings of related careers may help participants identify careers in line with their interests that they would not otherwise know about. In order for people to determine how their developing VSC fits with potential occupations, they must have accurate information about what the occupation entails and the steps necessary to qualify for it. Practitioners should also consider how school and prior work experiences might affect a student's understanding of how to develop career aspirations and work toward them. Our study showed that simply providing participants with options and asking the student questions about their interests and strengths was developmental for those who had previously not been asked

about their career aspirations.

The current student affairs literature calls for practice that supports students' holistic development (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Keeling, 2006; Komives & Schoper, 2006). Relatedly, our findings suggest that practitioners should strive to understand students' priorities and commitments to family, work, and school to help them successfully transition into the role of student. Practitioners must also be mindful of students' other salient life roles in the process of encouraging realistic and satisfying career decision-making. Knowing how the student role fits into students' broader identities helps identify not just areas where balance may be challenging, but also helps student affairs professionals situate conversations about students' transitions into college in the students' lived experiences and related challenges. Furthermore, a holistic understanding of students helps professionals create opportunities for mentoring that help students identify and combat salient stereotypes and negative messages. Our findings suggest that adult students also benefit from similar supports, resources, and processes in career finding and career development as traditionally aged students. However, students need something more to initiate VSC development. Community colleges with Cal-WORKs programs may want to develop and sustain stronger institution-community partnerships with organizations that can involve students in co-curricular ways (e.g., internships; career exploration), while involving their children. This maximizes co-curricular involvement without additionally burdening the student.

Finally, where possible, programs for adult students should support sustained relationships between staff and students. Sustained relationships give students the opportunity to receive positive messages about personal agency and abilities to be developed and reinforced over time. Sustained relationships also encourage practitioners to know the students rather than pressure them to solve discrete problems

that students bring to one-time drop in appointments.

Conclusion

Given the size of the adult student population and the student affairs focus on career development in traditional age students, this study described career development in one population of adult students. Theoretically, our findings call for differentiation between work and career, and show how VSC develops in some adult students, a process heretofore missing from the career literature. Knowing how students have been socialized to think about themselves, whether they can participate in career decision-making, and what their responsibilities in out-of-college contexts are key to helping students find congruence and/or cope with incongruence stemming from balancing multiple life roles.

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