Introduction

Whether after college graduation, graduate school, or even high school, we have all been in that place of searching for our very first "official" job. For many of us, this phase of life was characterized by an endless stream of applications apprehensively forwarded into the job search abyss – with nothing but "Thanks for applying!" and a months-late "We're sorry, we've moved on with other applicants" in return. Yet, after struggles with fluttery stomachs, self-doubt, bruised egos, and well-practiced interview handshakes, some of us finally landed that first job. Or, perhaps more appropriately, we landed a job experiment.

But, perhaps, that first job was far from what we thought we would be doing, even more distant from what we had been studying, and, at times, a few steps backward – for example, an accounting major selling pharmaceutical products, an engineer with a master's degree making company coffee runs, an art history major researching cancer prevention, a food-runner turned loan officer.

Too often, job seekers are told – frequently implicitly – that they need to have it all figured out: Finish school, choose your career path, get a job right away in the right field, and work your way up the professional ladder. There is a set path you should take. The path is linear, straightforward, and predictable. But if we examine the larger career development pathway, we will notice that this narrative is inconsistent with the realities. The "traditional" narrative of stability, predictability, and certainty is flawed or, at the very least, informed by antiquated notions of what career trajectories "should" look like. Such narratives can leave today's career seekers disillusioned and discouraged.

A new narrative is needed, one informed by the actual experiences of people from different walks of life – people returning to the world of work after caring for family, folks who are entering the workforce fresh from decades of schooling with multiple graduate degrees, or folks finding that first job after working through challenges to complete high school. In this

book, we share these experiences through story, and we aim to demystify the early career journey by presenting a tapestry of experiences from individuals across various fields and backgrounds. Thus, this book focuses on the stories of 62 people with a range of experiences and career paths, each recounting the road to first jobs and careers. This text highlights each of these participant's answers to questions such as *How did you get that first job? What was the job, relative to your initial career interests? Where are you now? How did you navigate family and reconcile aspirations with the actual?* and *How did you experience identity and/or culture as part of career path?*

The stories captured in the process of participants' authentic reflections on these questions paint a more accurate picture of what it is like to start a career, with all of the stress and disappointment, joys and fulfilling moments, and twists and turns that come with engaging in the world of work. Each story offers a glimpse into the multiple and complex ways people have overcome obstacles, seized opportunities, and carved out professional paths. These narratives serve as a reminder that there is no singular route to or definition of success; rather, success is composed of a series of personal milestones and learning moments that shape our professional lives.

Why Stories?

Why stories? In a world overflowing with advice on career-building, it is the personal story that truly resonates and inspires. In fact, it was Studs Terkel's (1974) *Working*, an anthology of people talking about what they do for work, that inspired this book. The stories in this text seek to capture the essence of diverse early career paths, highlighting the unique journeys individuals take to find their first jobs. Stories have a way of connecting us on a human level, transcending generic advice, and offering real, relatable experiences. They provide a window into the struggles, triumphs, and unexpected turns that characterize the job-seeking journey, especially for those just starting out in their careers.

Readers of this book will engage with a variety of voices – recent graduates, career changers, stay-at-home parents, and those who left higher education early in pursuit of other goals – across a range of industries (e.g., banking, farming, law, hospitality, medicine). As you take in these stories, we hope you find not just guidance but also encouragement and a sense of solidarity with those embarking on their own career paths. Through the

power of storytelling, we hope to amplify our capacity for empathy, learn from others, and find the motivation to persevere and succeed in our own endeavors. The stories give us an opportunity to ask, "How did they do it?" and honor a long-standing tradition of oral histories and narrative anthologies.

Overview of the Book and How Readers Might Approach the Volume

While honoring the power of story, we do so in a scholarly context. We ground participants' stories in a review of historical and contemporary literature on career decision-making and development. This review, presented in Part I, provides a summary of the academic research geared toward broad audiences, offering best practices for individuals (and their supporters, e.g., career development professionals) in the search for their first job. Just as our experience informs our need for a new narrative about the first job search, this review synthesizes contemporary research on career development models, approaches, and practices to offer tangible takeaways for those engaging the twenty-first-century world of work.

Part II of this text presents the 62 stories so generously shared with us – each titled and organized by the main themes that emerged from each narrative. The index may help if you, as a reader, hope to look for stories specific to your industry or field of study and/or educational background. However, we encourage you to sit with and hold space for all of the stories. You never know, despite being a biology major, your motivation for and about work might be reinforced by the story of a budding musician!

Based on Part II's narratives, Part III offers a reflection on how these stories converge, diverge, and connect with the theories reviewed in Part I. Here we include helpful resources such as self-audit and reflection questions for career seekers as well as career development professionals. And offer helpful text- and web-based resources. We hope to offer readers ideas on how to address weighty and critical questions such as *What do I do if I'm unable to finish college? Should I go to grad school or get a job first? How do I bring my whole self and my multiple identities to my career planning process? Who can I look to for support and mentorship?* and *How can I define success for myself?*

As authors, we believe that this book is for anyone searching for a job – especially their first job ever or new work in the context of career change – as well as folks who might be supporting those searchers. Whether you are newly out of high school, college, or graduate school, or returning to the workforce after decades working inside the home to care for family, we hope you find inspiration in these stories and tangible guidance to support your journey.

CHAPTER 1

An Overview of the Changing Nature of Work, Career Research, and Career Education

> *Career guidance operates within a tradition of concern for the welfare of the individual and a respect for the dignity of each person. It eschews a haphazard or serendipitous approach to career choice for one that is more coherent and structured. The aim is to maximise the vocational potential of each person for themselves and the world-at-large.*
>
> (Perera & Athanasou, 2019, p. 2)

In the opening passage, Perera and Athanasou (2019) offer an encouraging perspective on the purpose of career guidance as a pathway for shepherding individuals toward a calling that speaks to realizing their personal promise and contributing to collective benefit. In the nearly 175 years since the introduction of career guidance as a societal necessity for supporting the "transformation from agricultural collectivism to industrial individualism" (Perera & Athanasou, 2019, p. 28), much has changed with respect to the vastness of career choices and the methods for supporting individuals in their career discernment (Guichard, 2022; Maree, 2020). Central to making meaning of the personal narratives in Part II of this text is familiarity with the arc of career guidance and the changing nature of work. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to explore this changing nature of work as well as the history of career guidance and development both in the US and globally, including the salient theories on career development from structured paradigms to the more fluid and systems-inclusive models we understand today. Our discussion on theory will also examine the limitations of career research as it pertains to underserved, historically marginalized, and non-Western peoples whose unique lived experiences shape their world of work. Additionally, we speak to the place of career guidance and development in pre- and postsecondary education. The history, theory, and discussion in this chapter are explored in a way that offers a lens through which readers can interpret the many personal narratives ahead.

1.1 Career Research and Development in the US and Around the World

In his review of the history and development of career counseling in the US, Pope (1997, 2000) posited that the evolution of career counseling and the nature of work were informed by major societal changes, the impact of those changes on the lives of the populace, and, in turn, the necessary training and retraining of workers to keep society functional. Pope distilled these societal shifts into six critical stages (see Pope, 2000). Table 1.1 summarizes the shifts and changes that advanced vocational and career guidance into the late twentieth century as a necessity for the success of both the larger economy and individual lives. Though Pope's (1997, 2000) stages pause in the late 1990s, several other scholars have spoken to the current, twenty-first-century US career development landscape. In the following section, we explore this landscape and examine what is meant by the "changing nature of work."

1.1.1 The Changing Nature of Work

Savickas and Savickas (2019), in their recounting of the history of career counseling, pointed to the career themes of the twenty-first century as "transactional" (rather than relational) in nature, with a focus on "short-term efficiency in which both employers and employees act as businesses" (p. 38). They further differentiated the new, twenty-first-century nature of work by positing that "the new employment contract calls for repeated adaptation and personal responsibility in constructing boundaryless, protean, and intelligent careers" (p. 38). While twentieth-century careers were built around a mutual loyalty between employer and employee, Savickas and Savickas offered that the twenty-first-century markets would thrive on flexibility (e.g., the "gig economy") that spoke to workers' individualism and adaptation to, in Bauman's (2017) coinage, a "liquid life." In fact, the rapid growth of the gig economy signals a potential shift in the nature of work from a static, lifelong career to a flexible, ever-changing career. While such a shift offers workers a sense of individualism, freedom, and flexibility, it also poses potential threats to financial stability and exploitation – especially in the gig economy space.

In addition to changes ushered in by market forces, biosocial changes also play a role. One such change came in the form of the COVID-19 global pandemic. In considering the pandemic in tandem with the changing nature of work, Hooley (2023) contended "that the pandemic

Table 1.1 *Stages of career counseling development in the US*

Stage	Time period	Key elements of the stage
1	1890–1919	• Job placement and vocational guidance began as demand for workers shifted from agricultural spaces to the industrial economy. Vocational guidance was also influenced by opposition to the exploitation of workers. • Frank Parsons (1909), the progenitor of career counseling, established the Vocation Bureau in the Civic Service House in Boston in 1908, the first formalized career counseling space. • Self-assessment tools for vocational guidance emerged. • In 1911, the Boston Vocation Bureau launched the first career development publication (the *Vocational Guidance News-Letter,* now *Career Development Quarterly*). • In 1913, the National Vocational Guidance Association (now the National Career Development Association [NCDA]) was founded. NCDA sets standards and provides professional support and enrichment for the career development profession.
2	1920–1939	• Catalyzed by the Great Depression, vocational guidance entered educational counseling in schools and industry. • The growth of unions and unemployment fostered employment training programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps – partly overseen by the US Office of Education.
3	1940–1959	• Conditions after World War II led to the growth of professional practice in counseling, in particular career counseling as services were instituted to support veteran job placement and to tend to the new demographics of the higher education student body catalyzed by the GI Bill of Rights. • Interest in fostering science and technology professionals emerged as the US entered the outer space race.
4	1960–1979	• Sentiment around the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement created a desire for meaningful work among young people eager for societal change. In response, President John F. Kennedy tasked a vocational education task force that led to the establishment of the 1963 Vocational Education Act. The act provided for expanded career education programs that supported the transition from the "old" economy to the new. • Career development programs began to emerge in organizational and corporate environments – for example, companies such as IBM and Pacific Bell established career services centers.
5	1980–1989	• The US realized a transition from the industrial economy to one centering information and technology. Once again, workers were called to "retool" for a job transition. • Private practice career counselors gained notice as essential to supporting a US workforce in job transition. Additionally, outplacement counselors emerged to help workers find new employment as companies downsized and/or changed.

Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Stage	Time period	Key elements of the stage
6	1990–2000	• The Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1984 and the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988 codified, respectively, provisions for vocational education targeting underserved groups and technological job training. • NCDA conducted three national, inaugural large-scale surveys gauging the beliefs and attitudes of the US workforce. • Survey findings led career counseling professionals to conversations around the changing demographics of the US workforce, focusing on culturally inclusive career counseling. Discussions that centered on the range of gender, racial, and ethnic identities in the workplace were prevalent. • Career development was affirmed as a lifelong process, as opposed to one focused on immediate postgraduation changes. • Access to career guidance was supported by better technology. • Enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) established legislation for the protection of individuals with disabilities in hiring spaces and employment processes.

both exerted a massive impact on the labour market conditions within which individuals were developing their careers and profoundly shaped individuals' psycho-social worlds, shifting what they believed was possible and what they wanted from their careers" (p. 41). Nearly overnight, the shape, location, and rhythm of work changed. According to some, this change was simply an acceleration of key trends in the employment arena that were already on the horizon – for example, remote work, use of automation and artificial intelligence, and e-commerce (Lund et al., 2021). With this acceleration comes the undeniable realization that career guidance is even more critical now in the wake of new possibilities for the future of employment, as well as new challenges for individuals and the labor market as a whole (CEDEFOP & Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). For example, traditional career guidance methods of preparing and matching individuals to stable, long-term roles within specific industries must now shift to helping individuals develop resilience and adaptability in the face of changes to remote work patterns, technology in the workplace, and new competitors in the market. As such, we look to theories on career development to inform this complexity in guidance and a work landscape with many possible futures.

1.2 Salient Theories of Career Development

To state that the published material dedicated to exploring and explaining career development theory is robust would be an understatement. From the progenitors of early theories (e.g., Holland, 1959, 1973, 1985, 1997; Super, 1990, 1994) to the scholars who have evolved and expanded on those theories (e.g., Duffy et al., 2016), researchers have interrogated conceptualizations of career development – and their integration and convergence with other disciplinary tenets (e.g., psychology, sociology; Patton, 2019) – in great depth. A cursory search of the local library's career development literature catalog will yield such recent seminal works as the *International Handbook of Career Guidance* (Athanasou & Perera, 2019), *Career Development and Counseling* (Brown & Lent, 2020), the *Oxford Handbook of Career Development* (Robertson et al., 2020), and *Career Development and Systems Theory: Connecting Theory and Practice* (Patton & McMahon, 2021). Given the vast body of already existing and extensive literature on career development theory, the purpose of this section of Part I is not to regurgitate the full scope of what is known but rather to focus intentionally on some of the milestone theories that are relevant to and may inform how we can think about work and career in the twenty-first century. Our goal is to illustrate how career development theory has been and can continue to be reframed to serve individuals and the diversity of their lived experiences, especially as readers consider the range of individual narratives in Part II of this text.

With respect to an organizing framework for our discussion of career development theories, we borrow Yates's (2020) schema that placed theories into two distinct categories, with the caveat that there is much overlap between them: (a) content theories (focused on identity and environment) and (b) process theories (centering career learning and psychological resources). We do so with the full understanding that theories cannot operate in a vacuum and must be understood in relationship with each other and in the context of individual lives. In the following section, we briefly describe these theories and explore some of their limitations.

1.2.1 Content-Focused Theories of Career Development

A central aim of content-focused theories is identity, which can be defined as "an individual's sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any

other person and (b) a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles" (American Psychological Association [APA], n.d., para. 1). Cognition of self – including needs, abilities, interests, values, and skills – forms the basis of person–environment theories of career development. Theories of person–environment fit find commonality in the understanding that individuals possess certain characteristics or "vocational personalities" (Holland, 1997) that suit them to specific types of work or job climates (Juntunen et al., 2019). Career development researchers often point to Frank Parsons, founder of the Vocation Bureau in the Civic Service House (see Table 1.1), as the first scholar-practitioner to conceptualize the importance of person–environment fit in vocation (see Guan et al., 2021). Parsons (1909) outlined three critical principles central to vocational choice, explaining that every individual needs the following:

> (1) a clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations, and their causes; (2) a knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work; (3) true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts. (p. 5)

Subsequently, and aligned with Parsons (1909), theories of person–environment fit assume that congruence between the individual characteristics and the nature of the job climate will lead to positive outcomes (e.g., increased job satisfaction). Though there are many person–environment fit theories we can discuss here, next we focus on a few specific frameworks given their constancy in the larger career guidance and career development conversation.

Theory of Vocational Choice. The Theory of Vocational Choice emerges from the work of John Holland (1959, 1973, 1985, 1997) and relies on typology to establish an understanding of individuals and the environments in which they work. Holland introduced six personality types – realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional (RIASEC) – with which to classify individuals and, in turn, determine vocational fit and success based on interaction with the job environment. Four conceptualizations within the Theory of Vocational Choice represented how a person might relate to the environment: (a) congruence (i.e., fit between person's RIASEC types and those of the environment), (b) differentiation (i.e., the degree to which an individual's interests are clearly defined), (c) consistency (i.e., the extent of commonality between an individual's dominant or preferred types), and (d) identity (e.g., stability of an individual's talents and goals) (Holland, 1959, 1973,