Book Review - My Life with a Theory: John L. Holland’s Autobiography and Theory of Careers

by Jack Rayman and Gary Gottfredson (Eds.)

Reviewed by: Darrin Carr, PhD, HSPP

The definitions of career, the “time extended working out of a purposeful life pattern through work undertaken by a person,” and work, an “activity that produces something of value for one’s self or others,” are learned by students enrolled in many graduate counseling training programs (Reardon et al., 2019, p. 6). The text My Life with a Theory: John L. Holland’s Autobiography and Theory of Careers, edited by Jack Rayman and Gary Gottfredson, engagingly describes one person’s career whose work undeniably produced considerable value for the profession of counseling. Although the editors note that the target audience for this book is counselor educators and their graduate students who are studying Holland’s theory, readers from other disciplines such as history and philosophy of science, gender studies, higher education, and psychometrics will find value in its contents.

The 366-page book is well organized into seven sections primarily composed of previously published writings authored by John Holland and other leading scholars presenting Holland’s theory of personalities and work environments. Ample exhibits, drawn from Holland’s archive of correspondence and summarizations of past notes, papers, and presentations, provide additional context for his work as a researcher and detail about the development of his theory. These artifacts and anecdotes engaged this reviewer on a personal level with Holland’s life and work, something unexpected from a text focused on the development of theory.

This is the author's version of the work published in final edited form as:

The heart of the text is its second section, which contains Holland’s heretofore unpublished autobiography, which he drafted primarily in the decade prior to his death in 2008. Holland’s writing in this section is engaging and peppered with humorous anecdotes that make for an enjoyable reading experience about how he grew as a man in parallel with his eponymous theory. His life story provides an exemplar of career in how he navigated the complexities of personal and business relationships while developing and disseminating a theory that would form the basis of career assessments and interventions for millions of counseling clients around the globe.

A focus of Holland’s autobiography is his journey to becoming a researcher and publisher. Though he cautions the reader that his experiences were unique, Holland organized his autobiography in a way that will prompt nascent investigators to reflect on themselves and the challenges that a career in research will provide. Example topics addressed include identifying a research problem, finding a niche in which to work, collaborating with editors and publishers, and coping with critical feedback and research failures.

Known for his keen analytical mind, a somewhat rebellious nature, and a degree of directness that would get him into trouble with employers, journal editors, and critics, Holland does not hesitate to hold himself to account for his own foibles as a spouse, colleague, and theoretician. One of the many strengths of this book is Holland’s honest reflection on how criticism of his work, especially around issues of gender equity and measurement, motivated him to reexamine and improve his theory and related assessment instruments.

The book is well indexed and includes a glossary defining terms used in Holland’s theory, an annotated roster of key people who influenced Holland’s life and work, and an appendix of abbreviations frequently used in vocational assessment. One shortcoming of the PDF e-book received for review is that this excellent reference information is not hyperlinked to related concepts in the
preceding writings and exhibits it supports. The inclusion of such links in future versions of the text could enhance the book’s utility for readers, especially those learning about Holland and his theory for the first time.

Rayman and Gottfredson have compiled a rich source of information that provides a technically complete description of one of counseling’s most influential and well-known theories. Concurrently, this text tells a fascinating story of personal growth and resilience in the face of changing cultural and economic norms during the second half of the 20th century. It embodies a theme that ran throughout Holland’s life and that this reviewer emphasizes when working with clients and teaching counseling for career concerns to graduate students—an integrated balance of aspirational and rationale approaches to developing one’s career yields the most fulfilling and productive life. This book is a thorough and authoritative source that should be read by practicing professionals and students enrolled in counselor education graduate programs for years to come.
References
