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Vocational Identity in Social Work: A Co-occurrence Analysis of Scientific Trends

Ioana-Eva Cădariu^{1,2} and Dana Rad^{3,*}

¹ Department of Psychology, Tibiscus University of Timisoara, Romania, ² Institute of Psychotherapy Psychological Counselling and Clinical Supervision, Timisoara, Romania, ³ Center of Research Development and Innovation in Psychology, Faculty of Educational Sciences Psychology and Social Work, Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, Romania

cadariuioanaeva@yahoo.com, dana@xhouse.ro

Abstract. This paper gives a bibliometric overview of the science literature examining the intersection of vocational identity and social work according to the Web of Science Core Collection. By means of co-occurrence analysis of all the keywords on VOSviewer and full counting procedures, the paper identified 182 applicable terms which fell into four general thematic clusters. These clusters—identity and career development, social justice and empowerment, vocational rehabilitation and systemic barriers, and professionalism in practice—reveal a multidisciplinary landscape shaped by psychological, educational, and structural influences. The overlay visualization reveals temporal patterns of publication with growing interest in constructs such as career adaptability, resilience, and work volition. The study sheds light on relational, developmental, and sociocultural dimensions of vocational identity within stigmatized, marginalized, or constrained institutional contexts. The work emphasizes psychological salience concerning self-efficacy, agency, and meaning-making in the context of career development, coupled with gaps involving trauma, intersectionality, and non-Western representation. This study contributes to a more comprehensive theory of vocational identity as a personal and socially embedded construct, with implications for social work, psychology research, practice, and policy.

Keywords. vocational identity; social work; career development; bibliometric analysis; professional identity

1. Introduction

Vocational identity is a cornerstone of psychological development, as a bridge between personal meaning, occupational purpose, and social belonging. Within the practice of social work, in which practitioners are often confronted with complex human needs and structural disparities, vocational identity assumes an even more prominent role. It is not a question of job titles or occupational roles, but a question of matching values, self-concept, and social contribution (Kopsen, 2014; Villacis, Naval, & De la Fuente, 2023). The formation of vocational identity, particularly among psychologically and socially at-risk groups, has

significant consequences for how individuals adapt, prosper, or get left behind in an evolving world of work (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006).

The issues of vocational identity are not theory. They arise emphatically in contexts marked by trauma, recovery, stigma, or structural exclusion. For example, Stevenson, Thrower, and Murphy (2021) note how veterans with co-occurring mental disorder and alcohol/substance use disorders cannot rebuild a cohesive vocational identity among splintered life narratives. Similarly, Martin, Nunnerley, and Young (2022) reveal the nuanced "vocational wayfinding" pursued by survivors of spinal cord injury, illustrating the role of resilience and adaptive identity formation within physical constraint. Social work practice, based so deeply in human rights and empowerment, naturally overlaps with such identity struggles, making it an appropriate profession through which to investigate vocational development both theoretically and practically.

Contemporary career development is subject to greater uncertainty, social breakdown, and erosion of sequential career development. Psychological processes such as autonomy, meaning, and moral competence are fundamental to enabling individuals to function under such uncertain conditions (Sugimura et al., 2025; Gonul & Wangqvist, 2022). Young people remain caught between promises and institutionalized constraints. Young people and transition-age youth must balance intrinsic desires for consistency with extrinsic pressures from socio-economic conditions, inclining to cause delayed career commitment or interrupted career trajectories (Diemer & Blustein, 2007; Negru-Subtirica & Pop, 2018).

Beyond that, vocational identity is inextricably bound up with social connectedness and perceived support. Social support not only facilitates calling and meaningful work (Zhang & Guo, 2023), but also mediates well-being, particularly in collectivistic and transition societies (Chen & Zhang, 2020). Gender, ethnicity, educational opportunity, and institutional narratives influence processes of identity formation (O'Neil, McWhirter, & Cerezo, 2008; Vranken & Vandebosch, 2024). As Corlett et al. (2024) argue, vocational identity in the workplace also becomes a site of resistance and transformation against stigma and normative constraints.

In such a changing context, the role of educational contexts becomes more apparent. School engagement, for instance, has been found to predict the developmental trajectory of vocational identity with precision over time (Kvaskova et al., 2023). Concurrently, teacher identity and institutional needs—specifically vocational contexts—possess powerful forces that construct teachers and students (Kopsen, 2014; Dobrescu, 2016). Therefore, psychological inquiry into vocational identity must be broadened beyond personality to include socio-structural systems supporting or hindering its development.

Because of the theoretical thickness and inter-disciplinary breadth of vocational identity research, a current map of the field is necessary and appropriate. Bibliometric analysis offers a robust methodological lens with which to discern prevailing research agendas, fresh emerging fields, and epistemological blind spots. Over and above conventional literature reviews, bibliometric techniques offer the added benefit of delivering quantifiable indicators of patterns of co-authorship, keyword networks, and conceptual clusters—providing a bird's-eye view of knowledge construction and dispersal across domains (Collin et al., 2008).

In a field as complex as vocational identity in social work, such mapping is critical to integrate splintered scholarship and inform evidence-based practice. Previous research has emphasized the relational (Diemer & Blustein, 2007), moral (Villacis et al., 2023), developmental (Sugimura et al., 2025), and social (Corlett et al., 2024) dimensions of vocational identity but their intersections are under-theorized. Conceptual intersections may be monitored through data-driven analysis, for instance, construction of identity and emotional health (Chen

& Zhang, 2020), or autonomy and value from society as perceived (Gonul & Wangqvist, 2022), thus being able to feed into academic theory and intervention practice.

This study carries out a bibliometric examination of Web of Science Core Collection-indexed literature across the combined keywords of "vocational identity" and "social work." Using keyword co-occurrence and cluster visualization, we attempt to uncover the intellectual structure and thematic density of this body of research. Specifically, we address two guiding questions:

- What are the dominant themes in the literature linking vocational identity and social work?
- How has the field evolved over time in terms of conceptual emphasis, orientation to population, and theory integration?

In answering these questions, the study contributes to a structured knowledge about how vocational identity is constructed in psychology and social work research. It also opens up new fronts for theoretical integration and practice engagement—whether clinical counseling, educational development, or community rehabilitation.

In short, vocational identity is not merely a psychological milestone; it is an emotionally charged, socially located, institutionally built process that addresses the very essence of social work values. From transitions in adolescence (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006) to recovery identity crises (Martin et al., 2022), from moral purposefulness (Villacis et al., 2023) to workplace stigma (Corlett et al., 2024), this term reflects the inner and outer narratives of what defines life today. Through charting the area using bibliometrics, we both pay homage to the richness of this construct as well as set the stage for more integrated, human-focused conceptions of vocational development.

2. Method

2.1. Data source and search strategy

To investigate the intellectual space of research on vocational identity in social work, a bibliometric approach was employed drawing on data mined from the WoS Core Collection. As one of the most extensive and multidisciplinary databases of scholarly works, WoS offers access to peer-reviewed materials across a wide variety of fields with the guarantee of both scientific relevance and rigour for our research.

The search term utilized was "vocational identity" AND "social work" with quotation marks added to search for the exact phrase. The targeted search aimed to capture papers in which the two concepts had been clearly invoked in title, abstract, or keywords and, therefore, representing a substantive conceptual intersection. The query was run across all indexed years, with an interval of 2000-2024, to include both seminal contributions and recent literature over a 24-year period.

Following data extraction, bibliographic records were converted to a bibliometric visualization tool-compatible format, including complete metadata like titles, abstracts, author keywords, and cited references. The dataset generated included 2369 distinct keywords, providing a concrete basis for thematic and co-occurrence clustering analysis. Manual filtering or disciplinary exclusion was not conducted, allowing for complete mapping of the field as represented in the academic record.

2.2. Bibliometric technique

Bibliometric analysis was conducted using the VOSviewer, a established tool for the visualization and creation of bibliometric networks. VOSviewer is tailored to handle large sets

of scientific data and facilitates the creation of network maps based on keyword co-occurrence, co-authorship, and citation relations. In this article, we focused on keyword co-occurrence analysis, an approach enabling the identification of conceptual clusters based on the frequency and closeness of terms in the literature.

Full counting was selected as the weighting scheme, meaning every occurrence of a keyword in a publication was fully counted regardless of the term frequency or the number of other terms it occurred with. This strategy ensures that highly frequent and broadly co-linked terms are given adequate representation in the visualization.

To foster interpretability and retain analytical leverage, a cutoff of five appearances was imposed for keyword inclusion. From the initial 2369 keywords, 182 terms met this criterion and were retained for analysis. This tradeoff yielded a manageable but representative sample of the most salient and interconnected concepts in the discipline.

In generating conceptual clusters, the minimum cluster size was set at 30 key terms. This cutoff ensured clusters that were thematically dense and could identify interpretable patterns across the literature. The clustering algorithm in VOSviewer based on modularity optimization grouped keywords automatically into stable clusters depending on the intensity of their co-occurrence, without requiring human intervention. Each cluster thus reflects a latent thematic structure within the discipline, founded upon the mere semantic proximities between keywords across published articles.

Together, this strategy provides an evidence-based foundation for understanding how vocational identity and social work are theoretically interconnected, how their intersection has been evolving, and which psychological, social, and educational concepts drive the debate.

3. Results

3.1. Network visualization

The VOSviewer network visualization map (Figure 1) offers a close-up view of the conceptual map in vocational identity in social work. Each node in the map is a keyword from the literature, and the connecting nodes indicate co-occurrence frequency, where larger nodes are frequent occurrences and more influential in the dataset. The network is made up of 182 keywords that occurred at least five times, yielding a robust thematic mapping through full counting.

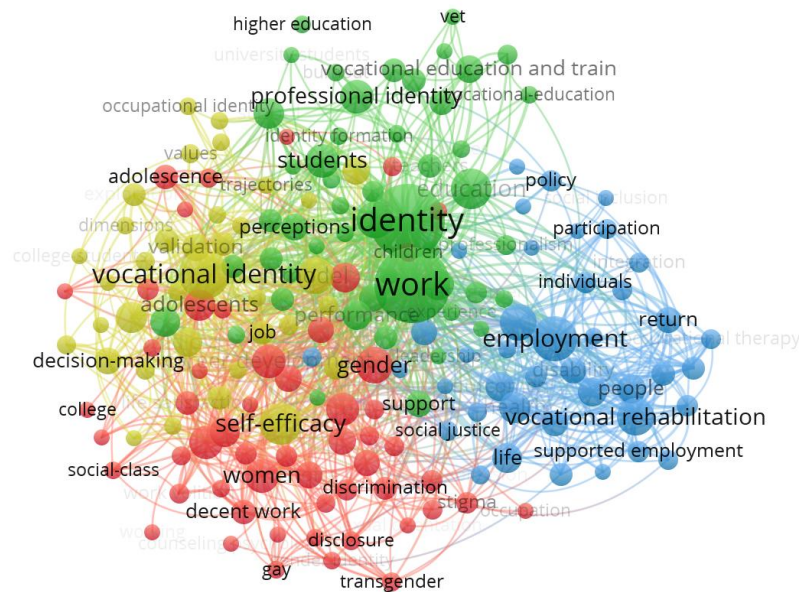


Figure 1. Network visualization

There were four big thematic clusters, each labeled with a distinct color and strongly linked to others, reflecting the interdisciplinary and networked area of vocational identity research. The green cluster, which occupies the center of the network, deals with the basic concepts of identity, work, and professional identity, with a focus on the psychological underpinnings of self-concept in the occupational context. Notably, studies such as those by Richardson, Meade, and Rosbruch (2009) and Mancini, Caricati, and Panari (2015) have described the interplay of personal and professional identity development among human service workers.

Adjacent to this central cluster, the yellow cluster is concerned with vocational identity, career development, decision-making, and educational pathways. All of these terms are closely linked with adolescence and with school transitions, indicating a developmental focus on identity formation during adolescence. This aligns with earlier work by McLarnon, Carswell, and Schneider (2015) on identity profiles in vocational contexts, and Creed and Hennessy's (2016) study on motivational orientations in vocational identity development.

The red cluster represents a diversity and psychosocial thread, uniting concepts like gender, decent work, discrimination, self-efficacy, transgender, and social class. These nodes foreshadow the field's increasing interest in inclusion, justice, and the impact of stigma on career development—themes echoed by Tebbe, Allan, and Bell (2019) in their study of TGNC adults and vocational meaning, and by Duffy, Autin, and Douglass (2016) on vocational privilege.

Finally, the blue cluster is centered on vocational rehabilitation, work, disability, and policy, summarizing the applied and institutional settings within which vocational identity becomes a rehabilitative or reintegrative problem. Curtin and Hitch (2018) and Zaniboni, Fraccaroli, and Villotti (2011) provide empirical substantiation for this cluster, investigating the systemic and psychological barriers to individuals with mental disorders or disabilities re-entering the labor market.

both the developmental pathways of vocational identity and the structural or institutional forces that shape vocational experience across populations.

Cluster 1: Identity formation and career development (yellow-green cluster)

This first cluster has a robust developmental focus, highlighting the psychological processes and stage changes that influence vocational identity development. Such important terms as vocational identity, career development, adolescence, career adaptability, aspirations, and decision-making pervade this thematic concern, reflecting a consistent emphasis on how individuals, especially adolescents and young adults, come to know themselves in work and vocational contexts.

The importance of early psychological influences is emphasized in Creed and Hennessy's (2016) model, which demonstrated how vocational identity formation is inextricably entwined with motivational schemas and goal orientation. Likewise, McLarnon, Carswell, and Schneider (2015) presented a latent profile approach that confirmed diverse identity pathways among young adults, affirming the context-dependent and non-linear nature of career identity formation.

The cluster also foregrounds emotional and social variables like self-esteem, identity formation, and adolescent aspirations, resonating with Hirschi's (2011) work on career calling and the search for meaningfulness. In this context, vocational identity is not merely a function of skill acquisition but a deeply rooted component of personal identity construction.

Further, Kvaskova et al. (2023) described how school engagement forecloses on vocational identity paths, thus pinpointing education as a site of identity experimentation and a self-concept stability framework. Similarly, Liljeholm and Bejerholm (2020) explored the identity conflicts encountered by young adults with mental illness, revealing how disruptions to psychological well-being complicate vocational clarity and impede workforce integration.

This cluster highlights the profoundly developmental and psychological character of vocational identity studies, positioning it at the core of prevention and intervention strategies in career guidance, social work, and educational planning.

Cluster 2: Social justice, diversity, and empowerment (red cluster)

The second cluster describes an active psychosocial space focused on equity, empowerment, and inclusion in vocational pathways. Gender, discrimination, social class, transgender, decent work, self-efficacy, and disclosure are the key words mentioned, reflecting a critical awareness of the way social positioning affects vocational identity development access.

Work and well-being were explored by research in this theme, revealing the intersectional disadvantage of marginalized historical groups. Tebbe, Allan, and Bell (2019) shed fruitful light on work and well-being experiences among TGNC people and showed how vocational meaning is a moderator of their psychological outcomes. This accords with broader arguments for vocational ways that take seriously lived experience and resist system-wide stigma.

At the center of this cluster is the tension between authenticity of identity and normative expectation in work settings, a thread pursued in Corlett et al. (2024) through exploration of stigma and identity management in the workplace. Duffy, Autin, and Douglass (2016) pushed this further by examining vocational privilege—how race, gender, and socio-economic status affect freedom to pursue meaningful work.

This cluster also reflects efforts to regain agency in occupational routes. Avnoon and Sela-Sheffy (2021) introduced the notion of counter-professionalization, illustrating how some professionals work to challenge dominant occupational norms to create new career identities. These stories reflect a growing emphasis on resilience, critical consciousness, and self-governance, particularly among those who experience occupational and personal marginalization.

Cluster 3: Vocational rehabilitation and systemic barriers (blue cluster)

This third group pinpoints institutional and policy problems within the vocational identity literature. Main keywords include employment, vocational rehabilitation, disability, supported employment, mental health, and return to work. Taken together, these keywords target the systemic barriers to which people with psychosocial vulnerabilities have to contend in reconstruing vocational meaning.

Research within this area emphasizes work's repair function after injury, trauma, or chronic sickness. Moore et al. (2024) show how the potential to return to a safe work position can be at the center of recovery and reassembly of identity for those with mental health disturbance. Zaniboni, Fraccaroli, and Villotti (2011) then describe how those with mental disorders experience structural and psychological limitations in planning their working lives, ending in unconnected or delayed vocational activity.

Institutional rehabilitation facilitators have also come under the limelight. Curtin and Hitch (2018) examined vocational rehabilitation facilitators' lived experiences and concluded the importance of empathic and adaptive approaches in facilitating successful return to meaningful work. These findings reflect a paradigm shift from "placement-focused" models to more holistic, identity-nurturing models, in which recovery is not only functional but existential.

Mental illness, stigma, and the right to work become the cross-cutting concerns in this population, calling for integrated services across the social work, health, and employment departments.

Cluster 4: Professionalism and identity in practice (green cluster)

The fourth cluster contains topics related to professional identity building in structured institutional environments, particularly education and helping professions. The most important words are professional identity, students, teachers, education, leadership, and self-efficacy—words that collectively indicate the ongoing negotiation of "who I am" in what I do.

Mancini, Caricati, and Panari (2015) explored how human service workers construct their identity through personal values as well as societal expectations, yet further supporting the idea that professionalism is less something that is learned and more something that is actually enacted. Similarly, Richardson, Meade, and Rosbruch (2009) present a constructionist view of identity processes, and they contend that vocational identity is constructed through intention, discourse, and relational contexts.

This cluster also includes role transition and institutional culture studies. For example, Wayne, Randel, and Stevens (2006) discussed how identity compatibility between work and personal roles influences career success and satisfaction—an issue especially relevant to educators and social workers with high emotional labor and role conflict.

Avnoon and Sela-Sheffy (2021) also have their say here with their consideration of counter-narratives to professionalization, demonstrating how identity work can invert rather than replicate institutional norms. This reveals the reflexive and dynamic character of

professional identity in spaces where human engagement and ethical considerations are of highest importance.

While each cluster identifies a particular thematic focus, some cross-cutting ideas existed across the entire network. Ideas such as agency, resilience, values, social identity, and social support commonly cut across disciplines to emphasize vocational identity's emotionally intimate, interpersonal, and morally orienting dimensions.

Liljeholm and Bejerholm (2020) highlight the influence of mental health on vocational continuity and identity coherence, whereas Wayne et al. (2006) highlight the importance of belonging and relational fit for maintaining long-term commitment. Additionally, Hirschi (2011) reminds us that vocational identity is frequently concerned with answering a "calling," combining purpose, passion, and perceived contribution in forceful and lasting ways.

4. Discussion

The present bibliometric literature synthesis exploring vocational identity and social work has found four salient thematic clusters, which correspond to key theoretical and applied fields of the psychological and social sciences. The discussion below describes these clusters in terms of psychological theory, takes into account the interface between social work and vocational psychology, and delineates underrepresented or upcoming areas requiring scholarly attention.

The emerging clusters within this analysis—identity and career development, social justice and empowerment, vocational rehabilitation, and professional identity in practice—have deep roots in enduring and contemporary psychological theory. Perhaps most directly, Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity is a rich framework in which to understand how vocational identity unfolds across the period of adolescence and emerging adulthood, as youth go through identity vs. role confusion and intimacy vs. isolation stages. The salience of terms such as adolescence, transition, and self-efficacy is consistent with this viewpoint, emphasizing the critical window of development in which career identities are established.

Similarly, Super's life-span, life-space theory of career development (discussed by Fouad, 2007) validates the developmental, situational, and self-concept-based aspects of Cluster 1. The recurring co-occurrence of concepts like career adaptability, decision-making, and exploration reveals that individuals negotiate between the vocational self-concept and environmental requisites across the life span.

Cluster 2, social justice and identity empowerment, cuts across Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner), particularly the role of membership in a group within vocational orientation and psychological experience. This can be seen by utilizing marginalized identity—gender, social class, transgender—and actually engaging with discrimination, stigma, and agency directly. Obschonka, Goethner, and Silbereisen (2012), on their part, exemplified the mechanism through which group identification with occupations or regions molds entrepreneurial aspirations as well as vocational self-assurance. Similarly, Ledman, Nylund, and Rönnlund (2021) referred to women's identity-related challenges in male-dominated professional trajectories and examined how vocational identity crosses paths with gendered institutionally informed norms.

One of the most important findings of the analysis is the wide conceptual and practical overlap between vocational psychology and social work. Social work's concern with empowerment, inclusion, and systemic advocacy overlaps with vocational psychology's concern with meaning, self-determination, and personal development in the workplace. This overlap is clearly seen in the work of Eini, Strier, and Shoshana (2024), who illustrated how

marginalized youth construct vocational identity through daily life practices and future projects in socially constrained environments.

Equally, LaPointe (2010) sketched out career identity as narrative practice, placing the individual as an agent of self who weaves together work and life meanings—a theme captured within social work person-centered and strengths-based models. Akkerman and Bakker (2012) added further nuance through an examination of boundary-crossing experience within apprenticeships, whereby learning environments are not necessarily places for skill training but for identity formation.

Cluster 3, focused on vocational rehabilitation, evidences acute tensions between institutional scripts and individual recovery narratives. Parsons, Eakin, and Bell (2008), for example, challenged dominant return-to-work models with a proposed reconceptualization of rehabilitation involving identity reconstruction rather than physical reintroduction only. This aligns with MacEachen et al. (2013), who found how "choice" in return-to-work settings is often restricted by structural constraints, thus rendering vocational identity conditional or precarious.

Several psychological constructs emerged as cornerstone throughout the clusters. Self-efficacy—a fundamental postulate of Bandura's social cognitive theory—was very widespread, referring to its relevance in career choice, resilience, and job performance. Similarly, values emerged as primary motivational beacons for career pursuit and identity expression, particularly in marginalized or stigmatized populations.

Resilience was another frequent co-occurring word, which chronicled the psychological adaptation processes individuals undergo while surmounting challenges of discrimination, disability, or systemic unemployment. Consistent with findings chronicled by Dunn, Martin, and Hackney (2023), who reported an integrative model linking identity, health, and role transitions in early work reintegration interventions.

Concurrently, burnout—albeit less central—emerged as an undertone within professionalism cluster, specifically around emotional labor in caring professions. Lippke (2012) illuminated vocational education students' invisible emotional labor, revealing how caring identities and vocational aspirations can become internal tensions, exhaustion, or identity dissonance.

Even with the rich information provided by the clusters, some key gaps were also uncovered through the bibliometric mapping. To begin with, the significance of trauma—both individual and systemic—is underrepresented. Although keywords like stigma, mental health, and recovery are present, few studies explicitly discuss how trauma, especially complex or racialized trauma, affects vocational self-concept and occupational integration.

Second, and although intersectionality was broached with the use of terms like gender, class, and transgender, there is no systematic exploration of the ways in which intersecting identities affect career trajectories. Noonan, Hall, and Blustein (2007) described the ways in which urban youth internalize social class within career decision-making, but longitudinal and participatory research are required, especially with groups who possess multiple marginalized identities.

Third, while the rehabilitation cluster touches on system aspects of vocational return, it rarely encompasses the emotional and narrative work that comes with reengaging occupational identities. In this respect, Fadyl, McPherson, and Nicholls (2015) provided a useful critical framework by highlighting how individuals are discursively formed as "entrepreneurs of the self" in rehabilitative contexts to perform resilience and adaptability within constrained frameworks.

Finally, more attention must be paid to positive occupational development across various cultural and economic contexts. Current literature is largely Western and urban-based, with little scope to explore identity development in rural, indigenous, or Global South contexts—where social work is often starkly rooted in communal and relational relationships.

In summary, this bibliometric analysis not only charts the current conceptual landscape of vocational identity in social work but also provokes a heightened dialogue between psychological theory, social structures, and human experience. Conjoining classical with critical, inclusive, and narrative frameworks holds out the promise of new research, practice, and policy avenues—one where identity is not viewed as a fixed trait, but as a dynamic, resilient, and relational achievement.

5. Conclusion

This bibliometric study provides a comprehensive, data-informed examination of the evolving landscape at the intersection of vocational identity and social work, revealing four robust thematic clusters and an intensely interdisciplinary field. Cluster analysis and co-occurrence mapping reveal how vocational identity is not merely a product pertaining to a career but rather an ongoing psychological process shaped by developmental, social, institutional, and affective forces.

Across all clusters, the findings reinforce the notion that vocational identity is constructed in relation to both self and society. In the domain of identity formation and career development, psychological theories such as Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, Super's career maturity model, and Hirschi's concept of calling illuminate how individuals define themselves in vocational terms throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood. These identity-building processes are not linear but are influenced by aspirations, adaptability, and educational engagement.

The social justice and empowerment cluster brings to the forefront the profound influence of contextual barriers—social class, stigma, and discrimination—on constraining or enabling vocational identity development. Social Identity Theory and intersectional theories are applied here to grasp how people navigate authenticity, resistance, and belonging in workplaces, especially in terms of gender identity, race, or disability.

In the cluster of vocational rehabilitation, the operation of trauma, recovery, and policy at a systemic level can be discerned. Psychological resilience, mental health, and return-to-work pathways are understood to be key to comprehending identity reconstruction following injury, illness, or long-term exclusion from employment. The argument illustrates the imperative for shifting from technocratic paradigms of rehabilitation towards narrative and identity-promoting practices which affirm agency and dignity.

The fourth professionalism and identity practice cluster reminds one of reflection regarding the performativity and construction of identity in social institutions where work is located—schools, hospitals, social service agencies. Scholarship in this area draws on narrative identity theory and the sociology of professions to illustrate how vocational identity subjectively feels and objectively is governed.

Interestingly, several cross-cutting constructs—e.g., self-efficacy, resilience, agency, social identity, and values—serve as psychological anchors across all areas. These factors highlight that vocational identity is not simply about finding work; it is about finding meaning, coherence, and self-expression in the very process of working, particularly for those facing complex social or psychological challenges.

The bibliometric approach of this research provides a unique contribution in that it not only charts dominant themes but also temporal dynamics and interdisciplinarity of the field. The findings are congruent with an integrative vision—one that brings together developmental psychology, vocational theory, critical social work, and rehabilitation studies.

Subsequent research is encouraged to continue to explore vocational identity as a relational and cultural construct, extending beyond Western contexts and employing participatory, longitudinal, and trauma-informed methodologies. With a move toward the future, there is a need for models that recognize vocational identity as both psychological achievement and social site of negotiation—dynamic, contextual, and very human.

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