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Multicultural Family Influence in Career Decision Making

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How a family influences the career decision making of its members is often related to culturally specific factors. Exploring the relationship between cultural diversity and family influence helps counselors to understand the uniqueness of all clients.

In the past 30 years, the population of the United States has seen a dramatic shift in its mixture of multiracial, multiethnic, and multiple language groups. Individual and cultural identities have diverged further with each generation while the homogeneity of a culture or ethnicity has been changed by intermarriage. Assumptions about work have shifted as people become more influenced by other cultures.

Workplace opportunities have risen for women and people of color with legislation like Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Still, the majority of many multiethnic and diversified groups remain worse off economically than their Caucasian peers. Diminished employment opportunities, discrimination, and denial from equal educational opportunities have been discussed as culprits in other sources.

There are also significant sources of cultural stress that immigrant families must respond to (Chope & Fang, 1999). Some of these are

- biological stress with changes in diet and the entry of new foods;
- physical stress in adjusting to a new, unfamiliar physical environment with different housing standards and climate;
- psychological stress when values, beliefs, attitudes, and sense of belonging change;
- family stress when generational differences are magnified by disparate contact with the host culture;
- social stress effected by vast changes in employment opportunities, educational instruction, and ethnic and social status; and
- cultural stress in the encounter of new politics, language, religion, and purchasing power.

The influence of families in the career development process of multicultural clients is complex for other reasons as well. Traditional patterns of social relations that espouse filial piety and respect for elders are not necessarily attended to by younger generations. Younger Asian immigrants, for instance, are seen to crave autonomy, self-expression, self-assertion, and individually oriented achievement (Lee, 1983).

Furthermore, when children of immigrants seek career counseling, they can't be attended to as simply third or fourth generation. They may have different values and witnessed their own parents' career reconstruction. They may be attentive to opportunities in fields that are neither understood nor supported by their parents.

Recently, there has been an attempt by career development professionals to develop approaches that give credence to understanding the context in which people are raised. They include creating narratives, contextualizing career development, and utilizing constructivism to give added meaning to the career decision-making process.

The more western European approaches that Gysbers, Heppner, and Johnston (2003) described as tenets may no longer portray the current work world in the United States. For example, individualism and autonomy are overshadowed by collectivism among some people of color. Affluence may not have as much impact among those who are more concerned with practicing values related to community advancement and social justice.

In addition, the work world is no longer a linear world (Chope, 2000). It's more like a matrix. This idea fits in with the thinking of people from cultures who also don't necessarily envision a linear career path. Agrarian cultures, for example, are particularly sensitive to the cyclical nature of work.

And work may not be as central to the lives of multicultural clients. Family, community, and spirituality are domains that people of color may gravitate to with more comfort than the work world.

In many cultures there is the expectation that sacrifices should be made for the family but not necessarily for the employer.

A popular framework for career counselors to utilize in conceptualizing their work and a client's worldview is the narrative. The narrative approach to career counseling is a type of storytelling that can be likened to an individual or family oral history (House, 1991). Cochran (1997) has pointed out that narratives in career counseling can help clients to gain a sense of their past history, current circumstances, and potential future goals. Many cultures appreciate oral histories and narratives over the written word.

Types of Information to Understand Family Influence in Multicultural Career Counseling

Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2002, p. 89) pointed to a greater concern for being aware of the contextual factors that are a part of the career counseling process. This is ever so important in work with a multicultural population. Level of acculturation, family values, and cultural heritage as well as economic issues, histories of discrimination, and unusual work opportunities can be incorporated into the career counseling process.

Counselors should consider the following template of issues to explore the influence of family culture and context.

Client's Cultural Persona

It is of utmost importance to encourage clients to reflect on their cultural identity and that of their families, and its influence in their career decision making. This is a topic that many times is so close to the client's experience that it is taken for granted.

Acculturation Modes

Knowing how clients feel about their culture allows for an understanding of their cultural adaptation process. Different clients will be ashamed or proud of their culture; many will wish to remain separate from their own ethnic group while others will reject mainstream culture. And in more complex examples, some will wish to adopt the values of the new culture while maintaining a hold on other values from the indigenous culture. For example, a client may incorporate the work values of American companies while continuing to uphold the family values of the indigenous culture. In addition, all acculturation modes involve a mainstream cultural context that is either affirmative and supportive of other cultures or discriminating and marginalizing. This dialectic among the individual, their families, and their social environment must be taken into consideration when

seeking an understanding of acculturation processes (Berry, 1997).

Demographic Environment

It is valuable to understand the nature of the population in the area where the client resides and how representative it is of the client's culture. This can help counselors avoid stereotypes and create an atmosphere in which the client feels accepted. Information about typical career paths of people from different ethnic groups will also be useful and can help to provide appropriate suggestions.

Diversity Within Cultural Groupings

It is also important that the counselor be sensitive to variations within a culture. For example, the broad categorization of "Latino/a" or "Hispanic" needs to be broken down further into the cultural differences between South American, Central American, Iberian, Cuban, Caribbean, Mexican, and other cultures. Middle Eastern ethnic groups share many similarities in culture and traditions which include the importance of family, spirituality, and a collectivistic set of societal expectations. But they also have many differences including language (e.g., Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, Armenian) as well as differences in religion. The family attitudes and traditions in smaller cultural groups are also likely to be different and need to be understood in order for clients to become more trusting of the counselor.

Legal Status

This is likely to be a sensitive topic for many immigrants. The legal status of a person and the family has important implications on career decision making. Legal services referrals may be appropriate in certain circumstances.

Language

Language is an important source of identity for people from all cultures. A sense of identity is developed with language use and it can reflect the dualism of acculturation. A given dialect within a language may also be important, and clients can express how a particular dialect further represents their identity. Moreover, the language that the client uses at home may contrast with that which is used at work or in school.

Recent demographic trends in the United States and the globalization of the economy have demanded multilingual abilities in the workforce. While clients may have grown up in contexts that discouraged the use of their native language, current market forces are transforming multilingual abilities into added value.

Religion

Religious values play an important role in the career choices of many. In the United States, a Protestant work ethic drives the economy. This ethic is often seen as anti-women and anti-immigrant with limited multicultural applicability. Any person who follows a nonmainstream religion may feel uncomfortable on the job. Jewish workers, for example, felt for years that they couldn't ask for time off during the High Holy Days and Yom Kippur. While some adjustments have reflected sensitivity to Jews in the workforce, there continues to be a need for sensitivity to the religious values of many others like Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

Attitudes About Work

The worldview of the family and culture regarding work must be addressed in the context of career decision making. Some families want the children to earn money and be independent. Others want them to achieve. And still others want them to refrain from drawing attention to themselves. Attitudes about work can also be related to earnings. Family attitudes about money, savings, assets of friends, supportive loans from others, institutional loans, and the trustworthiness of financial institutions can speak volumes. Clients and their families who grew up in countries marred by hyperinflation are likely to approach matters of savings and loans quite differently than expected in mainstream culture.

Rules in the Family System

Families may have different rules about the power and the influence of the extended family. Grandparents, aunts, cousins, and uncles may have a role regarding career selection and education that is different from that in other cultures. Confronting or disagreeing with parents can be seen as a sign of disrespect.

There may be conflicts in the family over just fitting in rather than being Americanized. There's a lot of pressure to conform to both the norms of the family and those of the culture. But the reputation of the family is a primary concern. Clients may find that majoring in programs that the family doesn't approve of, underperforming academically, and failing professionally are variables that are thought to bring shame upon the family. The children as an extension of the family are the next generation to bring pride to the family. And, when the children are unsuccessful, the family feels shame.

Many immigrant families and families of color take a more rigid point of view in the career decision-making processes of their children than those families who feel that they have more maneuverability and

privilege. Accordingly, more culturally diversified families try to protect their children by demanding that they follow familial instructions about what educational and career goals to pursue.

Gender Stereotypes

Most cultures have gender stereotypes regarding the roles that men and women play relative to work, educational experiences, and family responsibilities. Relationship status is also influenced by the culture and the family. The attitudes that partners have toward each other will often be influenced by the stereotypes that have been inculcated by the family and culture over a period of years.

Career counselors should be aware of the differential expectations regarding appropriateness of jobs for each gender. Counselors should also be knowledgeable of how partners or husbands and wives are able to accommodate to each other's careers. A most interesting question is how a woman's success affects the relationship. There are undoubtedly cultural differences in expectation about parenting roles. And the way pregnant women are viewed and treated will differ from culture to culture.

Conclusion

Exploring cultural diversity and family influence allows for a deeper appreciation of the uniqueness of all clients and the cultures they came from and are now part of. Being aware of differential pressures on people and their responses to them adds to the essential knowledge and awareness that all career counselors need to become increasingly culturally sensitive and effective. A template was presented for career counselors to use when gathering information from a multicultural clientele.

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