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A Narrative Approach to Multicultural Career Counseling

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Introduction

Career decision making and planning are ultimately affected by relevant cultural factors. Thus, one challenge for career counselors is the development of a shared worldview with the client early in the counseling relationship. The shared worldview can enhance the counseling relationship and assist in the success of the counseling process (Consoli &

Chope, 2006).

Consider Luisa, raised in an Oakland, California barrio. She had three sisters, working immigrant parents and terrific grades in secondary school leading to a scholarship to attend Stanford University. Her advisors in high school thought she was blessed with extraordinary potential. Her Stanford career counselor believed that she could pursue upper level business positions in the nearby Silicon Valley. But none focused upon her as a multiethnic young adult, more concerned about her fears, accent, Oakland address, bronze skin, and lack of familiarity with feminine social graces. The worldviews of the client and the counselor opposed each other.

Luisa's story points out that there are two contradictory world views that need expression in counseling process (Bullock, 2006). One view proposes that all of us hail from a common humanity regardless of our individual differences. The other advocates that we are all vastly different "based on our culture, experience, history, group membership, and identity" (Bullock, 2006 p.9).

The Expediency of Narratives

It is our thesis that the therapeutic telling of life narratives allows clients like Luisa to use their personal histories to give meaning to their evolving identities so they can structure their cultural and perceptual experience as they organize their thoughts about education and work. The narrative is particularly useful for career counselors to utilize in gathering information about a multicultural client's "worldview" (Howard, 1991). Cochran (1997)

suggests that narratives in career counseling help clients share their history, current circumstances, and future goals. Some cultures actually appreciate oral histories over the written word.

Storytelling allows a client like Luisa to become empowered, to construct new actions based on her story. Revisionism appears to be a major therapeutic building block, launching a new perceptual experience in the narrative therapeutic process. It allows the client to become authentic, listening to an inner voice that facilitates the fullest expression of core values.

In this contribution, we briefly describe narrative counseling and its application to career counseling. We also revisit a template of specific dimensions (Chope & Consoli, 2006) developed for career counselors to consider when engaging in therapeutic storytelling. The template exemplifies how counselors can use acculturation, language, religion, and work attitudes to assist in the career counseling.

Narrative Counseling

Based on the work of Sarbin (1986) and Bruner (2002) among others, White and Epston (1990) created narrative therapy. Narrative work has as a straight forward platform: we live our lives according to the stories that others tell about us and that we tell about ourselves. Recognition and success often come from others so we seek approval from family members, friends, peer relations as well as our respective cultures. Indeed, stories shape our reality and inculcate meaning into our personal and work lives.

There are three stages of development in narrative work: construction where information is revealed to the counselor, deconstruction where the counselor unpacks the cultural assumptions that form the base of the client's issues and demonstrates the effects of various forces on the client's life, and reauthoring or reconstruction, whereby the client's narrative is given a construction that is more meaningful to the client.

Comparing Narrative Counseling and Career Construction

The goal of narrative counseling is to help clients deconstruct their more oppressive stories, thereafter constructing or co-constructing with the counselor, new stories that are more empowering. In the context of career counseling, this reminds us of Savickas' (2006) suggestion that personal meaning is placed upon past and present experiences along with future aspirations reflective of life themes. He argues that career stories reveal the themes that clients will utilize when they evaluate their choices to take on meaningful work roles. Furthermore, Savickas looks for the self defining stories that reflect the fulfillment of developmental tasks and occupational transitions.

A primary therapeutic building block in the narrative counseling process is a client's reauthoring their story. In the process, different clients may escape from some of the domineering issues that have kept them from being entirely fulfilled. Since individual identity is created in relationship to other people, institutions, society and culture, if the perceptions of those relationships can be reauthored, clients may set in motion a process that can reconfigure an established identity. Narrative work allows clients to select from a personal data base and organize pertinent information into a story that delivers new

meaning.

Strategies in Narrative Career Counseling

Narrative counseling encourages counselors to explore culture, politics, ethnicity, racism and other forms of oppressive experience. The reauthoring process helps confront any disparaging ideas that clients have. Narrative therapy invites therapists to “identify how dominant cultural practices or certain mainstream belief systems attempt to define and to regulate people” (Monk, 2006, p. 261). A variety of techniques are available to assist in this process including externalization, deconstruction, unique outcomes, and mapping the effects of the dominant story among others. Questions are used to examine the influence a problem has had over a person. Clients discover that they are not only separate from their problems, but have power over them.

Externalization separates the client from the problem, so “the person is not the problem.”

A career counselor might ask, “How is your inability to find the ‘perfect job’ affecting your sense of your own worthiness?” or “How can you expect your family to appreciate your work when you take a job they don’t respect?”

In the deconstruction process, clients are made aware of assumptions that inhibit their maneuverability. “What thoughts do you have about being a woman in charge that provide reasons for the ways that you treat your direct reports?”

In unique outcomes, clients are helped to free themselves from their problems. The counselor invites questions like, “Tell me about those times when you were able to get up

in front of your sales force, free from impairing anxiety while feeling in charge?”

“Describe the day you woke up and were excited to go to work?”

In mapping the effects of the problem story, the counselor can explore the length of time that an externalized problem has been affecting the client, and the impact that the problem has had. Clinical questions can be quite simple and straight forward. “How long has this been a problem?” “How would you rate the problem on a scale from one to ten with ten being the worst?” “Describe your life without the problem being present.”

With the information gained through the techniques above, the career counselor co-authors a client’s reconstructed story. The client then embarks on a journey of discovery as earlier successes in life are used to create a promising future. The counselor doesn’t deny shortcomings but instead helps the client construct a more encompassing, strength-based narrative that prevents spiritual depletion.

The Cultural Context in Narrative Counseling

People are greatly influenced by their context, particularly their cultural context. How a narrative influences the career decision making of a client is often related to culturally specific factors that shape aspirations and a potential range of career choices. Exploring the relationship between narratives, cultural diversity and family influence helps counselors to understand the uniqueness of all clients (Chope, 2006; Consoli & Chope, 2006).

While workplace opportunities have risen recently for women and people of color in the

United States as well as in many other nations, the majority of many multiethnic and diversified groups remain worse off economically than their Caucasian peers. This disparity between groups of people is due in part to diminished employment opportunities, discrimination and denial from equal educational opportunities.

Relevant Dimensions for Constructing Narratives in Multicultural Career Counseling

Counselors should incorporate multicultural contextual factors in the career counseling process. In the narrative process of construction, deconstruction and reauthoring, we suggest that counselors consider the following template of dimensions to explore the influence of family culture and context (Chope & Consoli, 2006). Counselors may find discomfort in exploring some of the areas but they are all necessary in establishing a shared worldview with the client. We have organized a number of dimensions in a continuum spanning from the personal, through the family, to the social for use in narrative counseling.

Cultural persona

We encourage clients to reflect on their cultural identity and that of their families. Such reflection can be facilitated by inviting clients to view relevant films, listen to music or peruse appropriate literature and then discuss these activities with the counselor. We discuss with clients their views employment from a cultural perspective and their considerations when working where there may not be any people sharing their culture.

Attitudes about work

The worldview of the family and culture regarding work must be addressed (Consoli & Chope, 2006). Some families want their children to earn money and be independent while others want them to highly achieve and others want them to refrain from drawing attention to themselves. A protocol developed by the first author (Chope, 2005) includes useful questions to assist with this.

Rules in the family system

Families may have different rules about the influence of the extended family.

Grandparents, aunts, cousins, and uncles may play a role regarding career selection and education that is different from that in other cultures.

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. Multicultural families may 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 privilege. Accordingly, more culturally diversified families may demand that their children follow familial instructions about what educational and career goals to pursue.

The narrative process can be enhanced with the use of a career genogram (Dagley, 1984; Okiishi, 1987). This occupational family tree entails gathering information from extended family members. The genogram accompanied by good follow-up questions can facilitate an understanding of career expectations in the family and in the culture.

Gender stereotypes

Career counselors should be aware of the client's differential expectations regarding appropriateness of jobs for each gender. But they should also be aware of what the family and culture has to say about particular jobs for different genders. Counselors should also be knowledgeable of how partners or spouses are able to accommodate to each other's careers. There are cultural differences in expectations about parenting roles, and the way pregnant women are viewed and treated may differ from culture to culture.

Cultural context

The cultural persona of our clients is expressed through acculturation processes. Furthermore, acculturation processes involve a mainstream cultural context that might be affirmative and supportive of other cultures or discriminating and marginalizing (Berry, 1997). Knowing how clients feel about their culture allows for an understanding of their acculturation process and their career choices. Counselors need to understand how clients view mainstream culture and whether or not mainstream culture is welcoming of them. The counselor will also want to know where the client feels at odds with the attitudes toward work that are a part of the mainstream culture.

Diversity within cultural groupings

It is important that the counselor be sensitive to variations within a culture. For example, Middle Eastern ethnic groups, share many traditions including the importance of family, spirituality, and a collectivistic set of societal expectations. But they also have many differences including language and religion. The family attitudes and traditions in smaller

cultural groups are also likely to be different and need to be understood.

Language

Language is a 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. Current market forces are transforming multilingual abilities into added value if not an outright necessity in many contexts. Counselors may wish to ask questions like: “Can you understand the language of the majority culture well enough to receive training in that language?” “How can you promote the use of your multilanguage capabilities in supporting yourself for work?”

Religion

Religious values play an important role in the career choices of many. In the United States, a Protestant work ethic drives much of the economy. This ethic is often seen as anti-women and anti-immigrant with limited multicultural applicability. Any person who follows a non-mainstream religion may feel uncomfortable on the job. For example, Jewish workers in the United States felt for years that they couldn't ask for time off during the High Holy Days and Yom Kippur. The counselor needs to know how religion affects the client's sense of self and personal worth.

Demographic environment

It is valuable to understand the nature of the population in the area that a client resides and how representative it is of the client's culture. Counselors will want to know how comfortable the client is in his or her residential area and whether he or she is a part of an unrepresented minority group in the neighborhood or at the worksite.

Legal status

This is likely to be a sensitive topic for immigrant clients. The legal status of a person has important implications for career counseling. And basic questions need to be asked legitimately with sensitivity. "Are you able to travel to different parts of the country without being impeded?" "Are you able to travel outside the country and return?" "How is your work problem related to your immigration status?" "How is your career affected by the immigration status of those around you?" "How would you feel about your career choice if you felt you could easily move about the country?"

Moreover, career counselors need to be particularly appreciative that work or even work ambitions may not be as central to the lives of multicultural clients as they might be for others. Career counselors need to be open to clients prioritizing family, community and spirituality as these are some of the domains that multicultural and multiethnic clients may gravitate to with greater comfort; sacrifices may be made for the family and one's community but not necessarily for the employer.

The 2005 American Counseling Association Code of Ethics asks career counselors to

thoughtfully consider clients' culture in career development “ When appropriate, counselors appropriately trained in career development will assist in the placement of clients in positions that are consistent with the interest, culture, and the welfare of clients, employers, and/or the public. ” (ACA, 2005, A.1.e).

Conclusion

Assessing influential factors in families and culture relative to career decision making is consistent with the evolving postmodern approaches to career counseling. 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 add to the essential knowledge and awareness that all career counselors need to become increasingly culturally competent. We have created a template of dimensions that we believe will add to the construction, deconstruction and reauthoring of the narratives of career counseling clients. Contextual variables affect the career development and narrative counseling process. We believe that the template that we have created speaks to some of the more demanding multicultural issues that career clients will need to contend with.

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