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A Narrative Approach to Career Counseling: Applications to the Interpretation of the MBTI and SII

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Introduction

The validity, reliability, and general functions of assessment tools in counseling are topics of wide discussion and professional interest. Although there is an abundance of research in this area, there is a relative paucity of literature surrounding the process of interpretation and session facilitation when working with these widely used career assessment tools.

Too often, career counseling professionals simply “give” assessment results to clients with only limited context or information surrounding the practical application of the results. A more effective strategy would be to integrate the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Strong Interest Inventory (SII) results into the actual counseling session by encouraging clients to take an active role in the interpretation process. The information that has been published in this area is typically presented in the language of the scholar, with a focus on “giving” the interpretation to the client rather than joining with the client as an active participant. The combined effect of this scholarly language and didactic style serve to alienate the client from the process and, in doing so, limit the utility and effectiveness of the instruments.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a personality assessment that is commonly used in many areas related to personal and interpersonal development. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, originally developed in 1943, has a long history as a psychological assessment in the human services field (Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998). It is widely used by career counselors in assisting clients seeking to understand their personality type in relation to possible careers.

The MBTI is a psychometric instrument designed to classify people into groups of personality types on a range between dichotomous scales (Myers et al., 1998). The MBTI results consist of four letters indicating an individual’s unique personality type, with 16 possible combinations. Its reliability and validity have been reported by many studies and research over the past 60 years (McCaulley, 2000; Myers et al., 1998; Pittenger, 2005).

In career counseling and development, the MBTI is often used as a means of assisting clients in the process of clarifying their personality preferences and general life and work orientation. Career counselors use the MBTI to guide clients in the process of gaining personal insight and developing clarity of their typology as it relates to both career and relationships. However, in spite of its popularity in this area, there are few published resources that demonstrate the integration of the MBTI and career counseling approaches.

The Strong Interest Inventory (SII)

The Strong Interest Inventory (SII) is the first systematic assessment of interests, and its sound validity and reliability data have contributed to its continued application as one of the most widely used tools in this area (Donnay, Thompson, Morris, & Schaubhut, 2004; Hansen & Campbell, 1985; Harmon, Hansen, Borgen, & Hammer, 1994; Luzzo & Day, 1999). The SII was originally developed by E.K. Strong in 1927 (Hansen & Campbell, 1985) and was later revised by Hansen and Campbell in 1985. The SII has gone through multiple revisions since its first version. The most recent revision was completed in 2004 (Donnay et al., 2004).

The inventory provides scores on the individual's level of interest on each of the six Holland codes, referred to as *General Occupational Themes*. These include: Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Investigative, Realistic, and Conventional. Results are also provided on 25 *Basic Interest Scales*, which include broad areas such as art, science, politics, public speaking, and law enforcement. Clients also receive their scores on 211 *Occupational Scales*, which indicate the similarity between the respondent's interests and those of the normative sample. In addition, scores are provided on four *Personal Style Scales* (learning, working, leadership, and risk-taking) and on three *Administrative Scales*, which identify response patterns, the number of items omitted, and unusual profiles. The combination of these scales provided with the SII results presents clients with a broad perspective on general career areas that are likely to be consistent with their personal interests.

Thus, counselors can use both the MBTI and the SII as starting points for conversations surrounding those components of an occupation and career that are most congruent with the client's interests and personality type. Many studies support the use of the MBTI and SII and their combined application in career counseling and development (Donnay et al., 2004; Harmon et al., 1994; Healy, 2000).

The use of assessment is a major component of career counseling and development. Both individually and as combined tools, the MBTI and the SII are two influential assessment instruments used by career counselors. Indeed, assessment represents a core component of much of the work done by career counselors. When these interpretations are presented in a prescribed, and often rigid, manner multicultural experiences of clients are likely to be ignored.

Narrative Therapy

The Narrative approach to counseling grew out of the postmodern and constructivist paradigms that emerged in the mid 1950's. The constructivist paradigm has grown in popularity in the early 21st century in the field of social sciences, particularly, counseling and psychotherapy (Polkinghorne, 2004). White and Epston (1990) were influential pioneers of this approach in their family therapy work. Since their initial development of this theoretical perspective for work with families, it has emerged as a useful tool for other therapy modalities. Narrative therapy primarily focuses on the

client's personal story and social context.

According to the Constructivist perspective, there is no absolute truth. People construct their own reality via their interactions with others and their unique experience of the world (Payne, 2006). In keeping with this tradition, Narrative therapy focuses on the language, stories, personal reality, and social context of the client (Freedman & Combs, 1996). It is believed that people live through their stories, and that their stories describe their situations. For example, clients may present to career counseling with the feeling that they are unhappy in their job and the belief that they have no idea what actions to take. A counselor working from a Narrative framework will help the client to construct alternative stories that allow room for possibilities and strengths (Androutsopoulou, Thanopoulou, Economou, & Bafiti, 2004).

While Narrative theory has been a force in the field of counseling and counseling research for the past 20 years, published works have not explored its utility specific to the interpretation of assessments. However the paradigm shift in counseling and psychology, brought about by the multicultural movement in the late 20 th century (Pedersen, 1999), has begun to raise awareness of the importance of this model to assessments. In keeping with this paradigm shift, the authors suggest Narrative theory provides a promising alternative to more proscriptive approaches to the interpretation of assessments. The Narrative practice of inviting the client to participate in the process and honoring the experience of the individual is likely to result in a more effective interpretation process.

The National Career Development Association (NCDA) has strong concerns regarding the use of assessments in career counseling and the manner in which results are given to clients. The NCDA has developed guidelines for using assessment as well as for giving out assessment results. In particular, the interpretation of results to clients must provide accurate information, as well as avoid misconceptions and the excessive use of technical terms (National Career Development Association, 2003).

Using the Narrative Approach in the Interpretation of the MBTI and SII

Through the combined experience of approximately 300 MBTI and SII interpretations, including the application of both instruments together, the authors have found the Narrative approach to be a useful tool in facilitating the interpretation process. This flexible and active approach encourages clients to take an active role in the interpretation process and to take ownership of their assessment results. Moreover, by co-constructing their life stories with a career counselor, it empowers clients to gain sufficient insight in order to make career decisions (Cochran, 1997).

Sessions begin with the counselor and client introducing themselves. The counselor takes a facilitator role rather than an expert role. Typically, the clients present with a problem-saturated or dead-ended narrative (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). Common statements made by clients at this stage include: I don't know what I like, I don't know what to do,

and I don't want to do this anymore. In addition, clients are likely to address the therapist with follow-up questions such as: What should I do? What do think I should do? Do you think I should do what the Strong told me too?

Through the course of these interactions, the counselor avoids providing direction or answering questions for the client, but instead asks open-ended questions intended to facilitate the client's development of insight. For example, the counselor might ask: "What does this career mean to you?" or "What do you know about this career?"

As the focus of the session shifts to the interpretation of the MBTI and the SII results, questions also shift to bring the focus to the results of these instruments. For example, the counselor would begin to facilitate discussion surrounding such ideas as "What does being an extrovert mean to you?" or "What does it mean to you to be an extrovert working in computer science?" Or, "Given the fact that you are a perceiving person, what is it like for you to be around judging people at work?"

While reviewing the top ten occupations provided by the SII, the counselor may encourage clients to share their perceptions of their top occupations. In doing so, the client is given an opportunity to explore their narrative surrounding their interests, as well as the construct and the meaning that each career has for them. It is common for clients to encounter an unfamiliar occupation. When this happens, the counselor may ask "what kind of information do you need in order to move forward?" rather than simply providing an answer. Or, in order to facilitate discussion surrounding a familiar occupation, the counselor may ask "what does being a dentist mean to you, and how comfortable are you with this occupation?"

Through this process, counselors are able to make connections between the plots of the different stories told by clients, and to help them see the way in which their own narrative is influencing their choices or so called "alternative stories" (Shapiro & Ross, 2002). Ultimately, the client and counselor work together to create an alternative story that includes a more optimistic vision for the future.

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