Integrating Assessments of Career Self-concepts into Vocational Plans

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INTRODUCTION

The predominant theory in career counselling practice is based on a matching model, that is, a person will seek out an occupational environment corresponding to one’s personality type (Holland 1997). However, some practitioners do not address the person-environment fit by incorporating all three domains of behaviour relevant to career selection—abilities, vocational interests, and occupationally relevant personality characteristics (Lowman 1991). The model assumes that people have fully developed the several behavioural domains appropriate to their developmental stage to achieve the best fit. Solely relying on a matching model also negates Donald Super’s valuable contributions about career self-concepts and the developmental perspective (Super, Savickas, and Super 1996). Donald Super noted that people have multiple self-concepts. When these self-concepts are discovered and identified, they typically have not evolved uniformly. The intent in this paper, therefore, is to examine the matching process and the integration of evolving career self-concepts into the vocational planning practice.

Canada is a very large country with a diversified economy. Its people live in remote places as well as in ultra-modern, cosmopolitan areas. The segments of its economy are also different, ranging from agriculture, extraction of natural resources, finance, retail, and service, to high technology, and manufacturing. Canadians are not singular in appearance and beliefs, but comprise a multicultural society. Thus, the training model of career counselling professionals must be practice-oriented and its theoretical orientations need to be tested out in varied applications. The president of the university where I work, which a short time ago was the largest private university of the United States, adopted mission statements that its programs would be practice-oriented and urban-based. These mandates required faculty to investigate whether the theoretical, academic training offered worked with people of many cultures. During the last few years, the university, especially in its graduate and professional school offerings, has seen the closing of a number of its programs because they were not effective in practice and cross-cultural applicability.
OVERVIEW

This paper describes a career counselling process for clients to seek out a career goal. First, identify the career self-concepts with, provision of rationales and evidence for the initial phase of career counselling; second, assess the level of development of behaviour and self-concepts; and third, examine and apply the results of this matching to develop a vocational plan. Another objective of career-counselling is to present a simple, understandable, and common vocabulary to describe the major concepts involved in the process. It has been noted that counsellors often use their own vocabulary, which clients do not know, creating some communication problems.

IDENTIFICATION OF CAREER SELF-CONCEPTS

Career self-concepts develop through physical and mental growth, observations of work, identification with working adults, and general environmental experiences (Zunker 1998). With awareness and experiences in the world of work, a more developed career self-concept is formed. Career self-concepts are only part of the total self-concept. They are the driving forces that establish the career pattern that one will follow in life and offer a means of self-expression.

The six self-concepts focused on here are:
1. Interests—what I like and dislike
2. My self-view as a student/learner, for example, a university student, a hands-on learner in a short-term training program, or a worker. This also could be perceived of as one’s motivational self.
3. Abilities—what I am good or not so good at doing
4. Competencies—what I have learned and have became proficient at in school, or the skills I mastered on the job
5. Work values—what I need and want to seek through work
6. My personality characteristics—through feedback and self-observation, I come to realize that I have traits such as being shy, enjoying others laughing at my stories, etc. These characteristics are different from abilities and interests. This perspective follows that of the vocational theorist John Holland (1997), who believes that interest surveys are personality inventories. It is also obvious that interest surveys prioritize individuals’ likes and identify personal life directions.
RATIONALES AND EVIDENCE FOR THE PROCESS

What follows are the initial steps in working with career self-concepts, in the suggested order for them to be taken. Research evidence is separated from the rationale. In practice, the process described below is an assessment of the developmental levels of each of the six career self-concepts. More about using assessment information will follow.

Step 1

Use a client’s self-stated interests as a starting point about career planning.

Rationale
Do not ask your clients to pursue a goal that they don’t like, even though they might be good at it.

Evidence
Twelve studies have shown that self-expressed interests, repeatedly and consistently, have equal or better predictive validity for chosen college majors or actual career choices than that of widely used inventories of vocational interests. However, the studies also point to the value of using both stated and inventoried interests in practice (Harrington and O’Shea 2000).

Step 2

How motivated is the client to reach one’s goal?

Rationale
Only 20 percent of professional, technical, and managerial jobs in most countries require four years of college or university training. For example, some people say only a course and skill in JAVA, a computer language, are needed for entry into a high-tech position. This step asks, What investment in time and money do individuals wish to commit to preparing for their life role of worker?

Evidence
There is a general agreement that past behaviour is a good predictor of future behaviour. For example, a client can be viewed in stating an educational or training goal, as making an individual prediction about completing such a program. This step asks, Does the client’s history, such as school transcript or résumé, give any evidence of endurability? Look for continuity in course sequences, stopping, quitting, or changing direction.
Step 3

Common sense tells us that certain jobs require specific skills. To provide clients with good guidance, does the counsellor know which abilities and levels different jobs require?

Rationale

Does the client have the ability for this specific training program or job? I suspect that this question is more often the counsellor’s issue rather than anything else. This is where practice-oriented and cross-cultural perspectives enter. Is the counsellor being a gatekeeper without a clear perspective on the helper’s function, or has the counsellor assessed this person, taking into consideration his or her life experiences, developmental stage, and cultural background.

Evidence

How well has the client scored on each ability, or has the client self-assessed the correct abilities for the particular study area or job? Note that the focus is on multiple abilities. The CDM-R Interpretive Folder (Harrington and O’Shea 1999) lists the multiple abilities used in jobs.

Step 4

A critical question is, Can this person read? Does this person have the ability to learn the needed competencies and skills to adequately perform in a preoccupational education program or job?

Rationale

Be able to read a high school transcript. A and B grades can have meanings at variance with preconceived expectations about grades, depending at what difficulty level the course was taken.

Evidence

In examining a transcript, the type of course taken may be more significant, depending on the difficulty of the course, such as being a good student in a clerical program, an average student in a college course, a student who never took science or math courses, or a poor student in a general course. Some counsellors view a person by level of general intellectual development. A good student in a demanding secretarial program can have more scholastic intelligence than an average student in a college course.
**Step 5**

Values can reflect statements of need.

**Rationale**

One’s needs or values are personal. Thus, an individual’s need for money may override one’s inclination to use abilities or interest. Also, a desire for job security, which provides stability, may be more important than using one’s abilities or following one’s interests.

**Evidence**

The author has studied the prioritization of adolescent values in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Israel, South Africa, France, Norway, Finland, Portugal, Australia, and Japan. The conclusion from these studies is that the value rank-ordering of young people trans-nationally is quite similar. This is especially so between genders. In studying the uniqueness of values differentiating 106 samples of specific workers and college majors, Harrington and O’Shea (2000) noted general agreement on the most popular values for a job or course of study with on-site findings of U.S. Department of Labor and Australian job analysts. It is hypothesized, therefore, that in selecting their work values, individuals are expressing specific needs to seek personal satisfaction.

**Step 6**

Liking to do something does not mean someone can actually do or has the ability or aptitude for the activity. Interests may also express wishes and can also be used to describe personality types.

**Rationale**

Typically, discussing interests can start a positive conversation. Hearing “I don’t like anything” can be beneficial. You know right from the beginning that you may be dealing with a negative or depressed person. Thus, your counselling goals are more precisely focused on dealing initially with the negativism or depression before contending with career planning issues.

**Evidence**

Clients have expectations when they see a career counsellor. Discussing interests can fulfill client expectations. Voluminous research has shown that interest surveys have predictive value. The use of interest surveys also typically generates career alternatives that fit the application of decision theory. A decision involves choices or options. Most counsellors prefer a mindset that involves helping their students make decisions. Holland
Can you cut the process short and skip steps? This is not recommended because to do so may expose you to criticism for not following accepted procedures and open up the possibility for prejudice, racism, or sexism to creep into your practice, as well as increasing your clients’ risk of failure in achieving their goals. Unlike what some have learned from counselling courses, the author highly recommends that you jot down on paper one or two key words from the answers to the above questions. In doing this, you remember to use each step as you integrate it in a search for a focus and the development of a vocational plan. This is not to say that you come up with only one answer. In fact, several alternatives to reach a goal are desirable in a decision-making framework. The use of key words allows you to show your client, in a visual and concrete way, the connection or relevance of each of the six steps. Many clients are concrete thinkers.

**ASSESSMENT OF THE CAREER SELF-CONCEPTS**

The Canadian edition of the *Harrington-O'Shea Career Decision-Making System Revised (CDM-R)* (1999), published by Psycan in English and French, is the instrument suggested to assess the six career self-concepts described. Why use the CDM-R? The CDM-R was rated the most effective career assessment of those evaluated by a national sampling of high school counsellors who were members of the American School Counselors Association (Freeman 1996). In a comparison of The Self-Directed Search (SDS) and *Career Decision-Making System Revised* (CDM-R), results with university students revealed a significant effect whereby the CDM-R participants had improved knowledge of career decision-making principles. The SDS treatment did not exhibit any gains in career maturity (Luzzo and Taylor 1995). Graduate students who evaluated the CDM and SDS preferred the CDM, regardless of their client population, citing its positive aspects, being fun to take, stimulating, flexible, and informative (Bowman 1991).

For those taking the CDM, a profile summary serves as the answer sheet. “Job Choice” is evaluated by clients selecting their first and second preferred career areas from 18 career clusters, with sample jobs listed to define each cluster. “Future Plans” asks
clients to select one option that best reflects their current plan, ranging from graduate school to not working. “Subject Preferences” lists 14 school subject areas where people select the two they like most. Accommodations are made to permit outside-of-school learnings to be included in this section. “Work Values and Abilities” both list 14 options, each carefully defined with directions from which people select their four most important values and four best abilities. The final component assessed is “Interests”, which simultaneously can provide personality descriptions. Self-scoring of the six interest scales, which are consistent with the RIASEC theory, leads to three or four career clusters related to a person’s two highest interest areas. Self-scoring has proven to be motivational to survey takers by providing immediate feedback.

**CDM-R INTERPRETATION LEADS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A VOCATIONAL PLAN**

The CDM-R displays the fit of abilities, school subject competencies, and work values with jobs in 18 career clusters. Based on many research studies, the matches visually display for each career cluster the relationship of the behavioural domains associated with successful work performance. The objective of interpretation is twofold: First, positive reinforcement for those indicating agreement with the fit of their own assessment of their career self-concepts with job requirements, and second, the identification of which self-concepts are at odds with job requirements and need further examination. This information becomes a component of a vocational plan. The CDM-R authors stress that people need to better understand the interaction of work with personal values and needs, and the identification of all of one’s skills. Follow-up after one identifies the names and definitions of one’s most important values and abilities in game-like exercises developed by Stone and McCloskey (1993) can help individuals understand how values affect a career decision and how to develop a better understanding of one’s personal cognitive strengths.

**CONCLUSION**

Career self-concepts are key in considering a career decision. Those working with career decisions must consider all of their self-concepts. The CDM-R is an invaluable tool in assessing six
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major career self-concepts. Noteworthy are the comments of two reviewers: The CDM is an excellent example of a systems approach to career decision-making (Droege 1988, 87). Droege is the research psychologist in charge of the General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB), concerning which Turcotte (1994, 188) wrote that the GATB is one of the tests used as an integral part of the counselling service provided by the Canadian Employment Service. Another reviewer wrote that the CDM-R would be a good choice for those practitioners wishing to provide clients with a positive, active, and helpful career-exploration experience (Vansickle 1994, 177). Critical to the whole counselling process is that clients can understand in their own words, the integration of their self-concept with possible careers so that a vocational plan to achieve their goals can be developed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


