Beliefs in Career Counselling

TRINA ROLL and NANCY ARTHUR
Division of Applied Psychology
Faculty of Education
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

INTRODUCTION

Career beliefs are defined as positive and negative thoughts or assumptions people hold about themselves, occupations, and the career development process (Peterson, Sampson, Reardon, and Lenz 1996). People's beliefs about themselves and the world of work influence their approach to learning new skills, developing new interests, setting career goals, making career decisions, and taking action toward career goals (Amundson 1997; Mitchell and Krumboltz 1996). Raising awareness of beliefs is as important as knowing one's interests, aptitudes, and values, since this information is of little value if a client cannot put them into realistic perspective (Lewis and Gilhousen 1981). The discussion focuses on two types of career beliefs: perfectionism and self-efficacy. Their relevancy to career development will be described along with examples of recent research. Strategies for career counselling interventions are summarized.

CAREER MYTHS AND BELIEFS

Career myths are incorrect assumptions and generalizations about the career counselling and decision-making process (Amundson 1997). These myths are common beliefs internalized from family or societal messages. Beliefs that have previously served as guides to career development may no longer be viable in today's labour market (Amundson 1997). Myths such as "big companies are safe companies," "you can do anything as long as you are willing to work hard enough," "choosing a vocation or making a career decision is a one-time act" (Lewis and Gilhousen 1981; Nevo 1987) are examples of misconceptions that affect clients' career decision-making, including perceived options and career choices.

Impact of career beliefs

Career beliefs can influence clients' career-related aspirations and action in both positive and negative ways. Negative beliefs affect clients' perceptions of themselves and the world of work, increase clients' level of negative emotions associated with making a career decision, and immobilize clients' action toward their career goals (Sampson, et al. 1996). Negative beliefs can influence clients' actions at any stage of career counselling (Amundson 1997). Clients who experience negative emotions associated with the career decision-making process may perceive themselves as less able to cope with stress (Sampson et al., 1996). Anxiety or overwhelming feelings about career decision-making can impede action toward career goals (O'Hare 1989; Sampson 1996). If clients do not have a realistic perspective on their abilities, skills, interests, and values they may strive to reach unattainable goals but experience failure and discouragement. Alternatively, setting lower career goals avoids failure or challenging experiences, and the emotions associated with taking risks (Lent, Brown, and Hackett 1996).

Alternatively, positive career beliefs facilitate clients' movement through the career decision-making process, create positive expectations,

and contribute to effective problem-solving behaviour (Peterson et al.1996). Clients with positive beliefs are able to apply knowledge about themselves and occupations into realistic career and lifestyle goals, and ultimately engage in career-related behaviours. Career self-efficacy beliefs, or the belief in one's ability to complete tasks related to career choice and development, is one type of belief associated with positive emotions and behaviours. For example, people with higher degrees of self-efficacy are able to set and take action toward their career goals more so than those with lower self-efficacy (Taylor and Betz 1983). Higher degrees of career decision-making self-efficacy is also associated with increased engagement in career exploratory behaviour (Blustein 1989; Luzzo 1996). Therefore, career counsellors can listen for, and work to affirm those beliefs that help clients move through the career decision-making process.

PERFECTIONISM AND CAREER BELIEFS

Perfectionism has been characterized as holding excessively rigid personal standards, and focusing on personal shortcomings and failures (Pacht 1984). The essence of perfectionism is the belief that what one does is "never good enough" and that one's self-worth is measured through performance attainment. Beliefs may be represented by "all or nothing" thinking, in which people view their situations, performances, or options in extreme ways (Burns 1980). Recent definitions of perfectionism suggest a dynamic interaction between beliefs held about self and others (Hewitt and Flett 1991). Self-oriented perfectionism refers to setting rigid standards for oneself and evaluating one's own behaviour with rigorous criteria, striving to reach perfection while avoiding the failure that is equated with performances short of perfection. Other-oriented perfectionism directs standards for performance and evaluation of behaviour towards other people. In this type, perfectionism is directed outward, and beliefs and expectations are focused on the capabilities of others. The third type, socially-oriented perfectionism, reflects people's beliefs about what they perceive others expect of them. These perceptions may lead people to assume that others expect them to achieve unrealistic standards and that their performances will be critically evaluated.

Another typology of perfectionism suggests six dimensions (Frost and Marten 1990; Frost et al. 1990). First, concern about mistakes may distinguish perfectionists who are competent and successful in contrast to those who set standards that cannot be met. Second, and similar to self-oriented perfectionism, is the setting of high personal standards. The next two components have an interpersonal component and focus on parental attitudes, high expectations, and excessive criticism. Fifth, perfectionists are characterized as doubting the quality of their performances. Six, orderliness is reflected in the tendency to like order and to be organized. The concern about mistakes and doubting one's performance are associated with equating mistakes with failure and the feeling that one can never perform well

enough for one's own or others' standards. This limits people's views of their experience in terms of learning and future possibilities.

Perfectionistic beliefs are important for career decision-making and the pursuit of academic and occupational goals (Kutlesa and Arthur 2001). For example, perfectionism has been linked to post-secondary students' academic and personal adjustment in the first-year transition (Arthur and Hayward 1997; Hayward and Arthur 1998). Students' beliefs and expectations about what others expect of them can be as stressful as the demands they place upon themselves (Arthur and Hiebert 1996). Worries about meeting the standards of what others expect can inhibit academic achievement (Arthur and Hayward 1997). In contrast, perfectionistic beliefs that are focused on personal performance may either enhance success or be modified by other types of career beliefs, i.e., self-efficacy, that keep students from adjustment difficulties and moving towards academic success. It seems that holding perfectionistic beliefs, per se, may not inhibit academic and career success. If individuals possess the skills that support high levels of performance, and hold beliefs about their capacity for success, perfectionism may be adaptive.

A recent study examined perfectionistic beliefs, career thoughts, and self-efficacy of undergraduates involved in career counselling (Roll 2002). This study found that undergraduates involved in the career decision-making process held positive and negative beliefs about making career decisions. Perfectionism was also found to be an important consideration, particularly those with maladaptive perfectionism, having high standards but not the belief in their ability to achieve those goals. Also, perfectionists with high standards for themselves were found to have significantly greater self-efficacy beliefs than nonperfectionists in this sample. These results suggest there may be adaptive and maladaptive aspects to perfectionism; in particular, it may be the role of self-efficacy beliefs that contributes to this difference.

In other research on perfectionism and career development, students with socially oriented perfectionism were found to be more indecisive when making a career choice (Leong and Chervinko 1996). Perfectionism has also been associated with holding negative thoughts about the career development process, experiencing anxiety about committing to a career choice, and pressure to make a career decision based on the input of significant others (Osborn 1998).

There are few studies about perfectionism in the workplace. The consequences of holding beliefs about overly high standards for self or others, or feeling bound by concern to meet perceived expectations held by others may be similar to the impact of perfectionism in academic settings (Kutlesa and Arthur 2001). Combined with the realities of a workplace culture that demands "more with less," workers

who hold perfectionistic beliefs may feel pressured by their perceived demands and limited career options. This has been confirmed in research with teachers (Flett, Hewitt, and Hallett 1995) in which high levels of socially oriented perfectionism were associated with higher levels of job dissatisfaction. Perceived performance expectations from others may trigger symptoms of stress in the workplace or in managing demands between work and home (Fry 1995; Mitchelson and Burns 1998). Perfectionism has also been associated with workaholism through difficulties managing workload, a sense of control, and workplace relationships (Scott, Moore, and Miceli 1997).

STRATEGIES FOR CAREER COUNSELLING

More attention has been paid to the importance of career beliefs in career planning and decision making than strategies for career counselling interventions. A summary of strategies that the authors have used in their career counselling practices follows:

1. Listen to the language that clients use in describing who they are, their strengths, deficits, and views of the world. Labels, themes from stories, images, and metaphors offer important clues to uncover and address career beliefs directly.

2. Career beliefs may carry over from childhood and family experiences. Ask clients to remember phrases or sayings that were used by their family around work or leisure. Discussion about how clients lived with career beliefs during earlier times can build a foundation for examining their current influences.

3. A downward arrow technique (Burns 1989) can be used to uncover core career beliefs. Repeating cue phrases such as "What else would happen?" "Then what?" "What else do you believe?" "How would you feel then?" can help to focus the client on the thoughts, behaviours, and feelings that are associated with career beliefs. Conversely, an upward arrow technique can be used to explore changes in career beliefs with clients. This helps clients to summarize changes in career beliefs that have been the focus in career counselling.

4. Explore both personal standards for performance, and clients' notions about people who affect their career planning, e.g., family, teachers, supervisors, colleagues. Listen carefully for sources of pressure and expectations. Ask clients if they have confirmed what they think others expect from them. Clients may benefit from "checking out" expectations held by others, feel relieved to discuss this with significant others, and realize that they will be cared for by others in spite of their performances.

5. Career beliefs such as perfectionism may be long-standing patterns in clients' lives. It is difficult to let go of beliefs that were adaptive

during earlier times. Challenge clients about how well beliefs serve them in current contexts. A Socratic questioning method, popular in cognitive behavioural approaches to counselling, e.g., Burns 1989, can support clients to investigate "evidence" about the viability of a particular belief. This may involve testing the belief through conferring with others, or gathering facts about conditions such as hiring policies, gaining feedback about strengths, and performance criteria. Clients can also be asked to complete a "costs-benefits" analysis of holding on to specific career beliefs.

6. Identifying beliefs and their potentially negative influences for career development may provide sufficient insight for clients to generate alternatives. However, many clients need assistance to consider alternative ways of constructing their beliefs about self, others, and the world of work. They may also need practice to "believe in the belief." This can be done through role-playing in session and asking clients to act "as if" the belief were true in their lives for a specified period between counselling sessions. Client experiences can subsequently be reviewed with a career counsellor.

7. Past accomplishment and failure experiences can be reframed. Help clients view past accomplishments and "failure" experiences in a different light, looking for ways to help them attribute successes to their own efforts, and "failure" experiences to luck or external attributes. Renaming failure as learning experiences can help clients change the connotations of their beliefs.

8. Examine with clients potentially foreclosed career options using interest inventories. Incorporate new learning experiences into counselling to increase self-efficacy beliefs in those areas.

9. Formal methods of uncovering and challenging beliefs can be used through resources such as *Positive Works II* (Alberta Human Resources and Employment 1998) and *The Career Thoughts Inventory and Workbook* (Sampson et al. 1996).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Career beliefs are an important component of career exploration and adjustment in academic and occupational settings. Beliefs can have enhancing or debilitating consequences for a multitude of career decisions. This discussion has illustrated the potential influences that two types of career beliefs—perfectionism and self-efficacy—might have on clients' career counselling issues. Suggestions for career counselling include exploring beliefs expressed in families, performance contexts, and perceptions about what is expected by others. Beyond identifying beliefs, clients can be supported to examine which beliefs support their current career goals, beliefs that

have a negative impact, and beliefs that offer new possibilities and career options.

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