

Career-Life Planning With First Nations People

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According to Herring (1989), career counselling with First Nations people is simply not working. He states, “. . . vocational development for Native Americans consists mainly of unfulfilled daydreams, wasted potential, dashed hopes and economic struggles” (23: 273). McCormick and Amundson (1997) agree, and believe that conventional career counselling models cannot meet the needs of Aboriginal people because they are based on a worldview that is not shared by many Aboriginals. These authors add, “. . .to be effective, a counselor needs to understand the belief system and worldview of a culture before applying theories and techniques for healing” (34: 172). To respond to the need for a more culturally appropriate career counselling model, McCormick and Amundson developed the “Career-Life Planning Model for First Nations People.”

Career Life Planning Model for First Nations People

The Career-Life Planning model proposed by McCormick and Amundson (1997) includes eight components, each of which plays an integral role in defining career and life roles. The components include: core beliefs of connectedness, sharing of gifts, roles and responsibilities, balance, and values. It also incorporates three components found in more conventional career counselling models: interests, level of education, and labour market information.

Core Beliefs

It is important for counsellors to understand the significance of these core beliefs in order to use the model effectively. Connectedness refers to the traditional Aboriginal belief that the Creator intended all animate and inanimate objects in the universe to be equal and related to one another, like members of a large extended family (France, 1997; Lightning, 1992; Rogers, 2001). As such, when a person seeks any form of help, other members of the family are usually involved (Poonwassie and Charter, 2001). “Traditional First Nations healing approaches usually involve more than just the counselor and client” (McCormick and Amundson, 1997, 34: 172).

First Nations people generally believe that the Creator bestows unique gifts on every person expecting the gifts to be used in respectful ways (Lee and Armstrong, 1995). In essence, gift are akin to callings or vocations. McCormick and Amundson (1997) recognize the importance of this premise and postulate that “[g]ifts are the underlying basis for aptitudes and skill development” (34: 175).

Sharing gifts may influence roles the individual is to play in the family, the community, and in their own future. Roles and responsibilities are learned throughout life, through stories, modeling, and ceremonies.

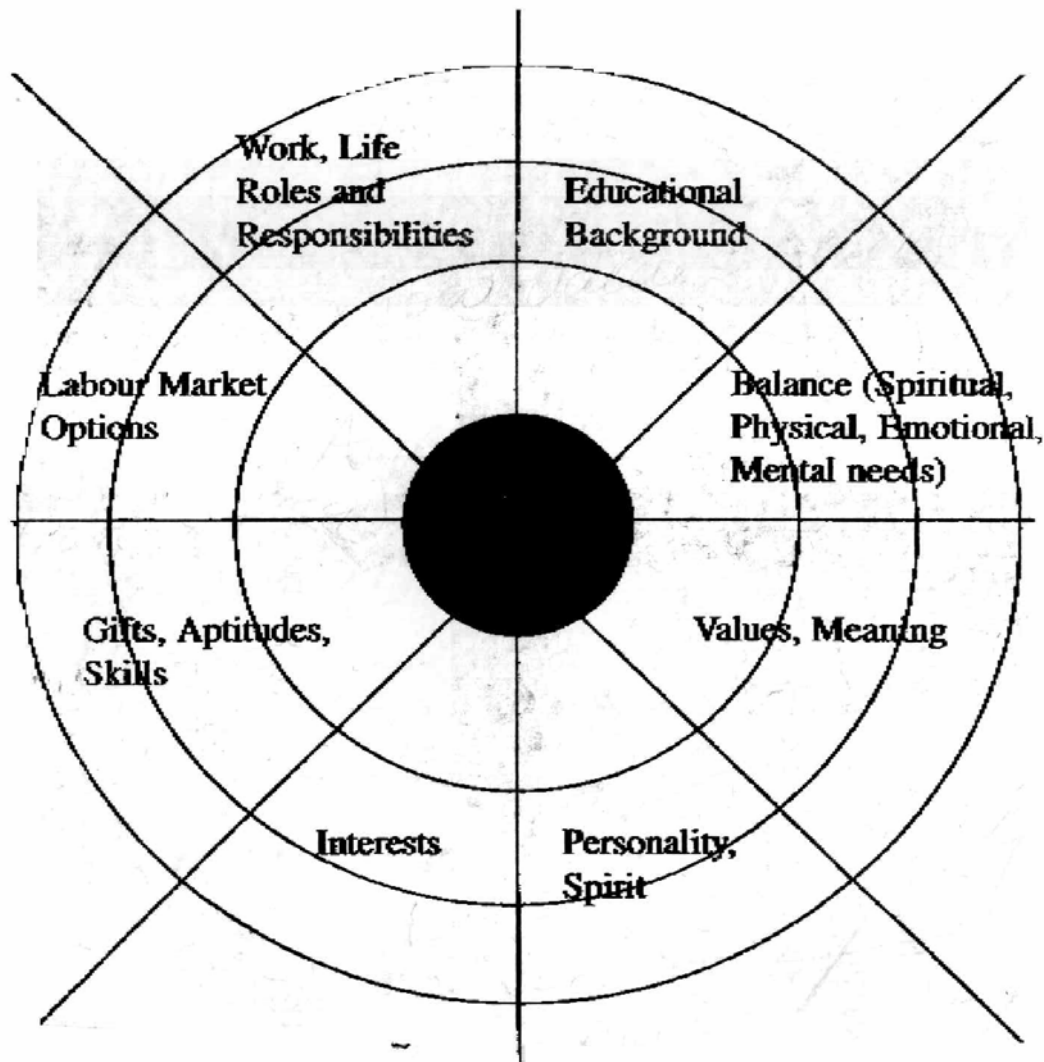
Most First Nations people believe in attaining balance between four functions of life: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual (Poonwassie and Charter, 2001). When balanced, individuals are viewed as healthy, capable, and able to make good decisions. Many Aboriginal people believe that values are what make them a distinct culture (France, 1997). It is through examination of one’s values that the individual can truthfully identify their strengths and limitations in ways that are affirming and respectful of self, family, and community. Values also help instill a sense of efficacy, an important factor in career-life planning.

Description

McCormick and Amundson (1997) depict their model with three concentric rings, radiating from the core (see Figure 1). The first circle represents the individual, the second, family, and the third, community. The eight components identified earlier are placed equilaterally within the circle. The goal is to articulate skills, interests, and level of client knowledge within each of these components.

Figure 1. Career-Life Planning Guide

Note: Inner ring = self perspective; Second ring = family perspective; Third ring = community perspective (McCormick and Amundson, 1997, p. 177). Reprinted with permission.



Following initial contact, clients are encouraged to invite members of their family and community to attend the session with them (i.e., individuals who know them well and who will offer support and honesty). Sessions last as long as it takes to gather information for each component. Field tests show that sessions average two hours in length (McCormick, Neumann, Amundson and McLean, 1999; Neumann, McCormick, Amundson and McLean, 2000). Once gathered, everyone sits in a circle, with the Career-Life Planning model drawn on a flipchart for all to see. Participants are invited to include any traditional cultural practices they are comfortable with (e.g., smudging, prayers, a talking stick, an eagle feather) to open the session. Following this, the session continues with the Pattern Identification Exercise (Amundson, 1995). This exercise involves the client describing an activity they enjoy and then identifying a time when they did not enjoy this same activity. When the client is finished, the counsellor asks an open-ended question from the component of the model that best fits with the client's story.

Following the client's response, family and community members are asked the same question, after which the client is asked to respond to what has been said. This process continues for all eight components. Information may be condensed on the flip chart or recorded on a protocol sheet. Taping is recommended so that no information is missed. The counsellor then asks if any themes or patterns stand out, and a discussion ensues on how to turn these into goals and action plans. Family and community members are asked to declare their roles in assisting the client to achieve these goals, encouraging responsibility and accountability by all involved. Knowing what support they have, and from whom, clients are further empowered to implement their plan. If goals change, the supportive individuals can assist the client in taking the necessary steps to implement the changes. It is not necessary to have the counsellor present to make these alterations, although they can be if the client chooses to invite them. This is a significant difference from conventional career counselling models as it empowers the client to make their own career-life decisions. The counsellor's function is to assist and facilitate the initial process, however the ultimate responsibility stays with the client and those they choose to include.

Once those participating agree that the exercise is complete, the session closes. Following the opportunity to listen to the tapes and summarize the data from the session, the counsellor adds any additional themes or information to a protocol sheet. The completed protocol is sent to the client, usually within two weeks, along with a thank-you card for participating in the session and a reminder ". . . that the session was only the beginning of the youth's career-life planning" (McCormick et al., 1999, 36: 171).

Overcoming the Limitations of Other Models

The Career-Life Planning model addresses many of the limitations and concerns raised regarding other career counselling models including: addressing worldview, cultural influences, view of work, barriers to educational attainment, lack of occupational knowledge, effects of acculturation and identity development, individual achievement, use of testing, and a lengthy, sequential process.

Although not all of these warrant further discussion, some are quite salient. For example, the use of a circle formation is a powerful cultural metaphor for the traditional values of balance, connectedness, interrelatedness, holism and equality. When First Nations people share in a circle, especially one that has been opened with a traditional prayer, everyone is considered equal, with unique experiences to share (Poonwassie and Charter, 2001). Using the circle to depict the model visually can be seen as an extension of this metaphor (McCormick et al., 1999). Therefore, this model by its very design refutes the concept of counsellor as expert.

Some participants have commented on the similarity of the model to the teachings of the Medicine Wheel and indicated how honoured they felt to have this part of their culture reflected in a counselling model (Neumann et al., 2000). According to participant feedback in two published field studies (Neumann et al., 2000; McCormick et al., 1999), the most enjoyable part of the experience was the inclusion of cultural values and practices.

A common criticism of conventional models is the primary focus on work (versus other life responsibilities). The current model includes all life roles and responsibilities in career planning. Most Aboriginal people do not view career as a primary source of identity (Martin, 1991; Richardson, 1981), but as a means to an end (Peavy, 1998). McCormick and Amundson (1997) state that "[m]ainstream counselling often tends to focus on thinking, feeling or behaviour, and leaves out the physical and spiritual" (34: 174). It is their belief that this is one of the primary reasons that conventional models of career counselling fail to hold meaning for Aboriginal clients.

Strengths of the Model

There are several strengths within McCormick and Amundson's (1997) model. Among these is the model's focus on career as a holistic part of life (i.e., planning for balance, especially in the areas of spirituality and physical well-being). Focusing on client strengths and experiences also adds to the fostering of competence and esteem. In addition, including the client's natural support system recognizes the importance of supportive relationships in career and life decisions. Setting and achieving goals becomes a joint effort, increasing the chances of success as well as providing the support system an opportunity in which to learn. In addition, all parties involved have access to the information the counsellor offers, which is unusual in conventional models. This has the potential to create a ripple effect for career development if this information is shared with others in the community. It has been this author's experience that this is especially true if subsequent sessions are held, as the number of individuals involved seems to grow with each successive session.

Another strength of the model is its simplicity. The process can be initiated fairly spontaneously, with little preparation or materials, as the components can be drawn from memory. The model's facilitation of open, caring conversations is an additional strength, building on pre-existing relationships based on care and trust. Some clients reported that they were not aware that others in their community valued them until participating in this type of session (Neumann et al., 2000). This, in itself, is an affirming process that connects the individual to others and to one's self.

Limitations of the Model

McCormick and Amundson's (1997) model has been successful in addressing shortcomings of traditional career counselling approaches. However, the model is not without its limitations, the most obvious being a lack of written resources. As a result, few practitioners know about the model or how best to incorporate it into their practices. This limitation has been addressed by recent conference presentations (Building Tomorrow Today, 2001; 2002; National Consultation on Career Development, 2002), published articles (McCormick, 2001; Offet-Gartner, 2002; 2003) and further development of the model in *Guiding Circles: An Aboriginal guide to finding career paths* (McCormick, Amundson, and Poehnell, 2002).

Another limitation was the model's original use of language. Terms like "labour market options" were cumbersome and often required time-consuming clarifications by counsellors within sessions. Clearer language may assist and encourage people to utilize the model. This, too, appears to have been addressed in the *Guiding Circles* workbook (i.e., three of the eight components have been renamed).

The duration of the single session proposed in the model is another possible limitation. If the model is followed as suggested, the session may run two or more hours – often an unreasonable expectation and rare luxury for the average practitioner. Given this length of time, issues of fatigue may also be a concern, especially if Elders are included. This author suggests utilizing the model over several sessions. *Guiding Circles* addresses this concern by developing the model into a workbook, which the client can use independently before and after sessions with a counsellor.

Finally, the model assumes a significant level of counsellor knowledge and appreciation of cultural information (i.e., the significance of the circle, talking stick, eagle feather, and prayers). This may suggest the model be used strictly by Aboriginal practitioners or those well versed in Aboriginal traditions. Further research may define the effect of excluding these practices from the model in terms of its effectiveness. Relatively little is known about the model's efficacy. As the model is relatively young, many of the limitations noted above may be growing pains. As more field-testing occurs and more materials are developed, the list of limitations will likely reduce, as has already been witnessed with the publication of *Guiding Circles*.

Conclusion

There are many career counselling models for use with Aboriginal clients. However, all have limitations and concerns. Most current models have been influenced by Eurocentric worldviews (i.e., "test-tell" style, lengthy sessions, expert roles, formal processes), often making them incompatible and ineffective with First Nations

populations. McCormick and Amundson's (1997) Career-Life Planning Model for First Nations People represents a new wave of career counselling. This model successfully addresses many of the limitations of traditional career counselling procedures. The current model may facilitate more effective planning, resulting in an increased number of Aboriginal youth staying in school. This, in turn, will increase employability and a greater sense of esteem. This is vital for the economic, physical, and spiritual well-being of First Nations communities, and Aboriginal people in general.

Further investigation into the utility of this model will likely uncover a wide range of applications and effective adaptations. Practitioners are encouraged to consider how this model might be adapted to best fit within their own practice, so that they too, may offer developmental suggestions.

McCormick and Amundson's (1997) Career-Life Planning Model for First Nation's People is an important first step in paving the way for more respectful, holistic, and thoughtful practice in the ever evolving field of career development.

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