

Constructivist Career Counseling

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All across the intellectual landscape, the forces of objectivism are yielding to the intreaties of constructivist thought. G.S. Howard, 1991.

Overview

Since World War II counseling as a profession has developed in a majority of countries around the world. On the level of the individual, counseling is a response to increasing perplexities and difficulties in everyday living. Family deterioration. The rise of corporate greed and mass consumerism, the deterioration of families, neighborhoods and small communities, and the increasing irrelevance of traditional authority all contribute troubles for the individual trying to cope with everyday living. At the same time the advance of science and technology coupled to the modernist ideas of Progress, Productivity and Perfectibility and buttressed by the belief that objective rationality would eventually "cure all" carries people forward into more and more complex and disturbing life circumstances.

It is in this modernist context that both the need for, and development of, counseling has occurred. A product of its time, counseling as a theory of helping, practice, and profession took on the trappings of Technical Rationality (Schon, 1983) such as objectivity, neutrality, expertness, behavioral reductionism, quantification, measurement, and outdated physical science research methods. Further, counseling came under the influence of modernist concepts such as efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability -- all aspects of instrumental reason (Taylor, 1991) which belong more to economists than to counselors.

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Today, the 'illusion of modernity' is coming home to roost in the form of globalization, robotization of labor and a growing 'under class' in all industrialized countries.

In certain ways the world of the 90's is better than previously (for some) and in other ways simply awful (for many). To quote Dorothy, "We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto". Counseling which helps individuals navigate these changing contexts is in need of revision and re-formation.

The implications for career counseling which stem from these social transformations are many and enormous. Client lives are increasingly characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict. Globalization and the undercutting of traditional habits and customs radically alters the nature of day-to-day social life and affects the most personal aspects of our experience. Counselors need to comprehend both the scope and effect of institutional transformations and how these transformations intertwine directly with individual life and therefore with the self. In a post-traditional society (most industrialized societies) the formation of self-identity necessarily becomes a **reflexively organized project** since the individual can no longer count on traditional sources of guidance and assistance. In general, this means that issues such as 'self-construction' instead of 'self-presentation', 'self-as-narrative' instead of 'self-as-traits', and 'life-planning' instead of 'career choice' become of paramount interest to career counselors.

In various articles (Peavy, 1992, 1993, 1993a, 1994) I have begun to outline the parameters and constituents of a constructivist career counseling perspective which is designed to be a counseling perspective appropriate to the post-industrial/post-modern context. In the rest of this paper I will present constructivist concepts and practical career counseling procedures.

Constructivist Concepts

The (world) is patently not a fixed reality and even less a particular physical environment, but most definitely a world of ever-changing individual constructions, or better...a world of social co-constructions.

-- Hans G. Furth, 1987.

Constructivist thought has its roots in philosophy, psychology, science, and cultural studies and provides a robust framework for informing counseling appropriate to post-modern contexts. Some of the more important constructivist concepts which can be applied to counseling are:

- 1) There is not a single 'God's eye' view of reality -- rather, there are multiple realities. From this perspective there is no 'one right way' to think, feel, or do. However, some ways are better than others. This is one of the challenges for constructivists -- to devise ways of ascertaining better and worse ways of thinking, acting, and being, thus escaping the pernicious criticism of 'relativism'. The fact of multiple realities forces us to consider more vigorously the consequences of our thinking and acting; to examine our assumptions and beliefs underlying alternatives, and to take individual choice more seriously.
- 2) The human individual is a 'self-organizing' entity, not a set of traits or repertory of behaviors. Each human's life is a story, or set of stories, under continuous revision. Each self is organized as a set of evolving biographical narratives.
- 3) Individuals 'construct' their own selves through interpretations they make and actions they take. Increasingly, societal conditions call for active and reflective selves, capable of creativity and meaning-making. More and more individuals will need to be

aware of the contexts in which they are embedded, and will need to become agentic, active, at times resistive, and creative in relationships and in work tasks.

- 4) A self is 'polyphonic', that is, it has several voices. Four important voices are: voice of health and well-being; voice of intimacy; voice of work life and learning; and voice of spirituality.
- 5) People are 'meaning-makers' and word-munchers. They use language and action to make meaning out of daily activities. The most important personal meanings are relational. Relational meaning is constructed through communication and interactions with others and with aspects of the surrounding world.
- 6) To exist as an empowered person requires reflection and examination of the assumptions underlying daily decisions and actions. Critical reflection enables the building of a world-view which includes:
 - a wholistic rather than reductive psychology of people.
 - the moral idea that self-fulfillment is 'good' -- that one should strive to become what one is capable of being.
 - a tripartite concept of personal freedom. First, without question, one is undeniably responsible for one's own thinking and actions. Second, one's own personal freedom is dependent upon the quality of relationships which one builds and maintains with others. Third, personal freedom is influenced by the kind and quality of one's engagement in meaning beyond one's own ego (transcendent meaning) in such phenomena as nature, society, art, hobbies, God, compassionate action on behalf of others, work, etc.

Practical Counseling Considerations

Constructivist career counseling is defined as a 'general method of life planning'. The constructivist approach emphasizes the use of innovative structures in problem-solving, client self-organization and empowerment, generation of meaning, critical reflection, and the mobilization of multiple intelligences and individual creativity. A constructivist approach to counseling is both philosophical and psychological and constitutes a framework out of which to work with more than a set of techniques. However, certain counseling interventions and principles are clearly constructivist and are briefly outlined in the following paragraphs.

- **Collaboration.** The counselor and client are construed as allies with each making significant contributions to the counseling process.

The counselor is an expert on the counseling process, and the client is an expert on his or her own life experience. The counselor provides a process within which the client feels simultaneously safe and challenged.

- **Receptive inquiry.** The counselor and client working together inquire into the client's life-world. The counselor's task is to promote such inquiry while at the same time remaining empathically receptive to the client.

Receptive inquiry tools include: meaning-generating questions, metaphorical transformations, the use of artwork and objects to create meaning, visualization, autobiographical writing and dialogical discussion.

- **Pattern recognition.** The counselor and client try to identify 'patterns of influence' which are shaping the client's thinking and acting, especially influential relationships. It is well established in career development work that relationships, both informal relations such as peer and family and mediated relationships such as those generated by media are often much more influential in career development and job-getting than traditional

psychometrically-oriented career counseling activities. Constructivist counseling focuses more on identifying meaning patterns and the creation of personal meaning than on the development or modification of behaviors.

- **Primacy of life experience.** The counselor and client work directly with the client's life experience perceptions and personal meanings as revealed through narrative, journaling, interview dialogue, concept-mapping, artwork and other self-revelatory activities. Counseling is not so much a matter of 'initiating' change or using change techniques as it is a matter of influencing change already underway and influencing the direction and transformation of an 'evolving self'. **Client resistance or reluctance** is a concept not used by constructivist counselors. Rather, a basic constructivist assumption is that whatever a client is doing or thinking is necessary for the client's coping or survival, given the client's immediate frame of reference. Thus, what others might term 'resistance' is interpreted by the constructivist counselor to be 'survivor skill'.

- **Mindfulness.** The constructivist career counselor regards mindfulness as desirable both as a goal for clients and for counselors. The essential elements of mindfulness are: 1) the creation of new categories/constructs for use in interpreting experience, 2) expanding ones openness and receptivity to new information, both internal and external, and 3) the awareness of more than one perspective on any aspect of one's life-world, including career. Various counseling activities promote mindfulness (Peavy, 1994). Critical reflection is a key tool in developing mindfulness.

- **Creating meaning through activity.** In career counseling it is involvement in activities such as work experience, cooperative education placement, job shadowing, volunteering, work-site visitation, work simulation, which can provide the basis for personal meaning generation in

relation to career. From a constructivist perspective, such activities by themselves are not sufficient for the client to derive benefit. Usefulness of these activities to the client are greatly enhanced through opportunities for 'reflection-on-activity' and 'activity discussion and dialogue' with the counselor during and following participation in the activity. Activity provides the raw materials (experiences) to work with, but it is reflection and counseling activities such as interview dialogue, group discussion, journaling, concept-mapping, dependable strengths analysis and metaphorizing of experience and self which influences the evolving self and career decision-making.

Concluding Comment

Constructivist career counseling represents a 'turn' in the history of counseling. It is a turn away from a reductionist and partial view of human personality and social life and the accompanying view of counseling as behavioristic and driven by a need to correct human deficit. It is a turn toward a view of the person as wholistic, self-organizing and maker of meaning. It is a turn away from 'psychometric self' and toward 'storied self'. The constructivist approach offers counselors and clients a method of cooperation and co-participation in meaning-making counseling activities with which to construct self and make sense of worklife in the 21st century.

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