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VOCATIONAL COUNSELING

The phrase *vocational counseling* represents a composite of the two most popular career services, namely, vocational guidance and career counseling. Career services are

psychosocial interventions that assist individuals in adapting to the community by choosing, entering, and adjusting to a work role. Other important career services include academic advising, occupational placement, job coaching, vocational rehabilitation, and career education (Busacca, 2002). Vocational guidance and career counseling are the most widely known career interventions because both are offered at most schools and colleges by educators who are sometimes referred to as guidance counselors. Although vocational guidance and career counseling share many similarities, they are easily distinguishable from each other. Vocational guidance involves *personal appraisal* by a counselor, computer program, or self-help booklet to assist individuals and groups in making better educational and vocational decisions. Career counseling is an ongoing, face-to-face interaction during which a counselor uses *problem appraisal* to assist a client coping with decision-making difficulties or work adjustment concerns. The following paragraphs elaborate the distinction between vocational guidance and career counseling by describing each career service.

Vocational Guidance

Early in the twentieth century, when the U.S. economy shifted from rural agriculture to urban industry, social workers worried about how they could assist youths in making suitable job choices. A social reformer named Frank Parsons (1908) believed that modern cities should train special personnel to offer "scientific vocational counsel to the young" (p. 3). Parson (1909) formulated the scientific model that counselors still use today, and it is as follows: "In the wise choice of a vocation, there are three broad factors: (1) a clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations, and their causes; (2) a knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work; (3) true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts" (p. 5). Guidance personnel use the model to match a person's abilities to job requirements and a person's interests to job rewards. The degree of fit within these two dimensions shapes important outcomes, such as occupational success, job satisfaction, and organizational tenure.

Vocational guidance serves both individuals and society in four ways (Watts, 2005). First, guidance assists individuals in learning about themselves, occupations, and how to match the two. Second, it promotes efficiency in matching individuals to labor market needs. Third, vocational guidance contributes to economic development through the effective use of human resources. And fourth, it encourages social equity and cohesion because counselors match individuals to jobs based on their abilities, values, and interests rather than based on their sex, race, or social class.

The key concept in vocational guidance is resemblance. Using the rationale that birds of a feather flock together, guidance personnel concentrate on matching an individual's traits to the traits shared in common by the group of people who populate an occupation. The occupational groups that the individual resembles most indicate fields of work to consider. The scientific method for determining resemblance rests on person appraisal by means of psychological tests. Guidance specialists have constructed aptitude tests and interest inventories to empirically determine the degree of resemblance between a client's traits and the traits that characterize groups of workers in various occupations (Savickas, Taber, & Spokane, 2002). An interest inventory automates Parsons's three steps of scientific guidance. First, an individual describes the self by responding to a series of questions about interests, activities, and hobbies. The scoring keys contain the occupational information in that they distinguish the item response of diverse occupational groups. The score service performs the third step by providing scores that indicate the degree of match between the individual and a set of occupational groups.

The empirical interest inventories that indicate resemblance to occupational groups have been supplemented with a method that indicates resemblance to hypothetical vocational personality types. A trait is a distinguishing feature of a person, for example, extroversion. In comparison, a type is a group of cohesive traits that collectively distinguish a personality pattern, for example, that of a leader. Created by Holland (1997), the typological approach to matching people to positions theorizes that there are six vocational types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. Interest inventories based on Holland's model provide scores that indicate a vector of resemblance to the six types. For example, an individual's scores may indicate that she or he most resembles the social type, next the investigative type, and then the artistic type. Using an occupation information resource such as the *Dictionary of Holland Occupational Codes* (Gottfredson & Holland, 1996), *Occupation Finder*, or the O*NET Resource Center (http://online.onetcenter.org/), the counselor can find that individuals who resemble the social-investigative-artistic vector are commonly found working as clinical psychologists, counseling psychologists, registered nurses, or heating and refrigeration inspectors. The client may then be encouraged to explore these and similar occupations to determine if one of them would make a suitable choice.

The third approach to person appraisal is called person matching. Rather than using scores to indicate resemblance to occupational groups or vocational personality types, this method produces short vocational biographies for a set of actual persons whom the test taker most resembles. Regardless of whether the resemblance is to an occupational group, vocational personality types, or

individual people, the results must be communicated to clients. Thus, in addition to person appraisal, the other primary feature of vocational guidance is test interpretation.

Test interpretation is the defining function of vocational guidance. Clinical and organizational psychologists use tests to better understand the client themselves or to describe the client to someone else such as a psychiatrist or personnel manager. Vocational guidance counselors use tests to increase the client's own self-knowledge and to identify fitting occupations. Because test interpretation presents clients with objective data, it promotes rationality in vocational decision making. Research has examined test interpretation along the dimensions of communication and relationship. An effective interpretation is conveyed in the language of the client rather than the numbers of test scores and aims to maximize retention of information for future decision making. Effective communication can take place with or without a relationship counselor. When communicating test scores to an individual or a group, the counselor uses the interpersonal relationship to enhance communication. This working relationship is absent when test results are interpreted by a computer program or the individual uses an information booklet for self-interpretation. Research indicates that client retention of information is about the same for any of the four methods of test interpretation (i.e., individual, group, computer, self), although a relationship may enhance actual decision making. Following test interpretation by any of these four methods, the communication effects are reinforced by having clients identify future goals and write down specific plans for the next steps (Brown et al., 2003). Although vocational guidance is highly effective for many individuals, some people remain undecided after completing vocational guidance. These individuals who are not yet ready to make choices may benefit from career counseling to develop their attitudes toward, beliefs about, and competencies for career decision making.

Career Counseling

Counselors who are sensitive to variations in clients' readiness to make occupational choices appreciate the distinction between the content of occupational choice and the process of vocational decision making. *Content* refers to which occupation a client should enter; *process* refers to how a client arrives at an occupational choice. With its focus on content, guidance concentrates on personal appraisal, that is, formulating an idea of the person's abilities, interests, and opportunities so as to make a prognosis of occupational prospects. With its focus on the decisional process, counseling concentrates on problem appraisal, that is, identifying decision-making difficulties, their seriousness, and which counseling approach might be most useful. The analogy of an assembly line may be used to compare occupational choice and vocational decision making. Occupational choice can be likened to the product, whereas vocational decision making can be likened to the production activities. Problems in the decisional assembly line can produce choice problems, the most common being unrealism in aspirations, indecision about what to do next, indifference toward preparing to enter the work world, and indecisiveness when confronted with the need to choose.

Career counseling aims to resolve these decisional difficulties and help clients to formulate a choice by increasing (1) concern about the work role and one's career, (2) control over one's career, (3) curiosity about opportunities and options, and (4) confidence to make career choices (Savickas, 2005). Depending on their training and preferences, counselors use different counseling models and methods to increase concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Regardless of the actual counseling methods used, each career counseling session usually includes some mixture of anxiety reduction, decision-making training, information gathering, problem solving, and encouragement. Fostering concern about choices to be made is done by making the future feel real as individuals become aware of the vocational development tasks and career transitions to be faced and the choices to be made in the near and distant future. Anxiety is reduced by planful attitudes and a belief in the connection between today's experiences and tomorrow's circumstances. An increase in personal control over the decision-making process occurs when clients learn the principles and practice of decision making, rehearse assertive behaviors, and make attributions to effort. Counselors prompt curiosity about possible selves and alternative work scenarios by providing occupational information, reinforcing exploratory behavior, clarifying values, and discussing defining moments in the client's autobiography. To strengthen the confidence needed to make occupational choices, the counselor uses encouragement techniques that heighten self-esteem and increase self-efficacy concerning one's own ability to successfully execute a course of action needed to make and implement suitable educational and vocational choices.

In summary, research evidence supports the effectiveness of both vocational guidance and career counseling (Whitson & Oliver, 2005). The effectiveness of each career service increases when the counselor selects the career service that corresponds best to the needs of the client at that point in time. Counselors determine which service may be most beneficial to a particular client, and under what conditions, by conducting an intake interview or administering an inventory to assess the client's degree of indecision and level of readiness and resources for the decision-making process (Savickas, 2000). In addition to determining whether

vocational guidance or career counseling may be the better intervention, such assessments may also indicate the usefulness of other career services, such as academic advising, youth mentoring, occupational placement, vocational rehabilitation, or career education.

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SUGGESTED READINGS

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