

Constructivist Counseling for Career Indecision

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Twentieth-century vocational guidance has been an objective enterprise in which counselors have studied and treated career indecision by abstracting and objectifying it. This article describes how the logical positivist perspective on indecision as an objective phenomenon has evolved over the course of this century. Then, the article explains how constructivist counselors view indecision as clients' subjective attempts to give meaning to crisis points in their lives. This view permits a conceptualization of career counseling as a process of articulating a client's life theme. The article concludes with a case study that illustrates a life-theme approach to counseling for career indecision.

During the last decade, much attention has been paid to developing models for vocational development that address the subjective experience of career (Carlson, 1988; Cochran, 1990, 1991, 1992; Collin & Young, 1986, 1988; Neimeyer, 1988, 1992; Ochberg, 1988; Young, 1988; Young & Borgen, 1990). Most of this work deals with conceptualizing career actions from an epistemological position that views knowledge as socially constructed. Unfortunately, the literature that addresses vocational development from the constructivist perspective has not yet seriously addressed the topic of career intervention. Thus, this article seeks to turn the discourse from theory to practice by considering career intervention to be a meaning-making endeavor. In this endeavor, career counseling is a social context for making a client's self intelligible to that client and for modifying that client's narratives about self. This article concentrates on counseling for career indecision and contrasts the approach taken by objective science to that taken by constructivist sciences. Before describing constructivist counseling for career indecision, I briefly trace the history of counseling for career indecision.

INDECISION AS AN OBJECTIVE PHENOMENON

In concentrating on "true reasoning," Parsons (1909/1967) scientized vocational guidance by making it an objective enterprise, thus

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legitimizing it for the twentieth century. Accordingly, a majority of counselors have relied on the philosophy of science articulated by logical positivists to guide their study and treatment of indecision (cf. Richardson, 1993; Savickas, 1993, 1994). The epistemologic perspective of modern science articulated by logical positivists seeks to extract knowledge from reality and validate it against theory. Using the postivist perspective, counselors have abstracted career indecision from its context and objectified it with reliable and valid measurement procedures. During the course of the twentieth century, the positivist perspective on indecision as an objective phenomenon has evolved in three phases. In each succeeding phase, the concept of indecision has become more complex, first moving from dichotomy to unidimensional continuum and then to a multidimensional concept.

Indecision as a Dichotomy

In his seminal work on career counseling, Parsons (1909/1967) advised counselors to classify clients into two main categories.

First, those who have well-developed aptitudes and interests and a practical basis for a reasonable conclusion in respect to the choice of a vocation. Second, boys and girls with so little experience that there is no basis yet for a wise decision. (p. 19)

Counselors followed this advice by classifying career clients as decided or undecided. In reviewing the history of career indecision research from the 1930s until the late 1980s, Slaney (1988) characterized it as simplistic because it relied exclusively on the decided-undecided dichotomy. Early studies investigated the prevalence of indecision by repeatedly inquiring about the percentage of college students who were undecided. Implicit in this survey research was the assumption that indecision reflected a personality problem or defect. Eventually this assumption prompted numerous studies that sought to identify academic, personality, and biographical differences between decided and undecided students. Generally the findings of these studies have been interpreted as showing that undecided students are both less accomplished and less mature, although Slaney (1988) argued convincingly that this conclusion is empirically untenable. The view that indecision reflects immaturity, or worse psychopathology, led counselors to concentrate their efforts on curing the underlying causes of career indecision. Part of this effort involved the construction of diagnostic schemes that identified the cause of immaturity as intrapersonal anxiety, interpersonal conflict, cultural differences, lack of skill, limited self-knowledge, and so on (Crites, 1969, chapter 7).

Indecision as a Unidimensional Continuum

In the mid-1970s, many researchers stopped operationally defining indecision as a dichotomous state (i.e., undecided vs. decided) and began to view indecision as a unidimensional continuum that ranged

from undecided to decided. Holland and Osipow helped to popularize the process view of decidedness by providing counselors with scales that indicate a client's position on the continuum. The Vocational Decision-Making Difficulties Scale (Holland, Gottfredson, & Nafziger, 1973) and the Career Decision Scale (Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico, & Koschier, 1976) assess a client's position on the indecision continuum and identify difficulties that delay that client in arriving at a career choice.

Indecision as Multidimensional Concept

The third phase of the postivist enterprise concerning career indecision now finds counselors viewing indecision as a multidimensional concept. Instead of considering undecided students as a homogeneous group, this current stance views undecided students as including heterogeneous subgroups (Slaney, 1988). Some researchers are working to turn scales designed to measure the unidimensional continuum from undecided to decided into multidimensional scales capable of distinguishing among these subgroups (Savickas & Jarjoura, 1991; Vondracek, Hostetler, Schulenberg, & Shimizu, 1990). Other researchers are producing second-generation scales expressly designed to measure multiple dimensions of indecision and to identify subgroups: My Vocational Situation (Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980), Commitment to Career Choices (Blustein, Ellis, & Devenis, 1989), Career Decision Profile (Jones, 1989), and Career Factors Inventory (Chartrand, Robbins, Morrill, & Boggs, 1990). These scales reflect the current goal of career counselors to devise effective means of diagnosing heterogeneous subgroups of undecided clients so as to assign them to different interventions.

Viewing indecision from the positivist perspective has clearly helped counselors to understand it. Nevertheless, the studies and measures of indecision have not contributed as much as one would hope to the actual treatment of indecision. This may be, in part, because viewing indecision from the positivist perspective objectifies and decontextualizes indecision and thereby excludes an individual's subjective experience of indecision. Indecision is operationally defined by client responses to lists of decision-making difficulties that have been abstracted and decontextualized. Of course, effective counselors have always combined scores from measures of indecision with an appreciation for the client's uniqueness and the context in which that client is situated. Nevertheless, indecision itself has all too often been the focus of treatment. The constructivist perspective offers another view of indecision, and maybe one that lends itself to prompting innovations in the treatment of career indecision. Constructivism views knowledge as socially produced and legitimated through use. Thus, in counseling, the constructivist perspective focuses on the person who is undecided, not the indecision itself. The focus on the person prompts counselors to particularize and contextualize an individual's subjective experience of indecision. This focus switches the operational definition of indecision from objective test scores to subjective stories told by a client.

INDECISION AS A SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

From the constructivist perspective, counselors do not operationally define career indecision as a list of decision-making difficulties. Instead, constructivist counselors view career indecision as a sign of transformation in progress (Cochran, 1991). From this perspective, indecision is part of the normal experience that occurs when people are about to lose their place. In the process of losing their place and making a new place, they transform themselves and forge a new identity. The indecision expresses hesitation before transformation. Individuals purposively pause in their line of movement. This pause or hesitation does not stall or stop movement, however; a stall or stop would be diagnosed as depression. The movement, rather than advancing, swings back and forth and side to side. *Wavering*, to use Cochran's (1991) elegant term and succinct definition of indecision, reflects movement toward meaning rather than toward a goal. Wavering hesitation brings into the present, from the past and the future, more fundamental motives to guide a life story that is at a point of transformation. During this hesitation, clients review their lives and focus awareness in an effort to grasp the theme; that is, to construct the whole that will clarify the parts. They will eventually resume forward movement and use the newly clarified and refined life theme as a map with which to plot a new location for themselves.

The career indecision experienced by adolescents and young adults may occur, in part, because they have not recognized their life themes. They may not yet know or be able to give voice to their own life projects because they have not yet thought them through. What psychologists call the "identity-formation process," that is the process of self-definition, may be understood as a developmental process in which one goes from not knowing one's life theme to first knowing it and then being able to tell stories about it.

Counselors help clients to resolve their career indecision and overcome their hesitancy about stepping into the future by articulating and clarifying their life themes and then discussing the next steps in moving toward their goals. A client's indecision becomes an opportunity for making meaning of one's life when a counselor concentrates on how that career indecision fits into the pattern of larger meanings being lived by the client. Choices are not isolated; choices are embedded within an ongoing pattern of living. So, the counselor frames the indecision within the client's ongoing life story by constructing a continuous narrative about the client's pattern of living and the constellation of choices that she or he now faces. Counselors then use this narrative to help resolve doubt and encourage the client to speak openly about ambitions for the future. Connecting today's indecision to yesterday's experiences and tomorrow's possibilities makes meaning, allows comprehension, and creates new possibilities. In short, clarifying their life themes enhances the ability of clients to decide and eases their forward movement into new constructions of experience.

CONSTRUCTIVIST COUNSELING FOR CAREER INDECISION

One life-theme counseling model for career indecision involves five steps (Savickas, 1989). First, the counselor collects from the client stories that reveal the client's life theme. Second, the counselor narrates the theme to the client. Third, the client and counselor discuss the meaning of the current indecision by relating it to the life theme. Fourth, the client and counselor extend the theme into the future by naming interests and occupations that address the preoccupation and project that define the life theme. Finally, the client and counselor rehearse the behavioral skills needed to specify and implement a career choice. The next section describes the typical process of using these five steps with a client. It is followed by a final section that reports a case study that illustrates the five steps.

Steps in Life-Theme Counseling

After meeting a client who seeks to resolve her or his career indecision, the counselor learns the details of the current indecision and proceeds to elicit stories that reveal the client's life theme. A life theme is like a plot in literature. Plots compose the individual's plan of action by which events are endowed with meaning as parts of an integrated whole. Life stories deal with the interaction between the linear incidents (life events) that make the plot (i.e., the plan of action) and the timeless, motionless, underlying themes that make the life. Accordingly, the counselor seeks two types of stories: those that reveal the client's preoccupation or central life concern and those that reveal the plot or what they plan to do about the preoccupation. The counselor then connects these stories with the thread of continuity that is the life theme.

In deciding which types of stories to elicit from undecided clients, counselors may rely on advice from literary criticism as to what makes a good story. Stories achieve their meaning from explaining deviations from the norm (individual differences). Thus, counselors often start at the beginning of a client's life by asking for stories about the families who raised the client. In listening to these stories, counselors keep especially alert for the trouble, imbalance, or deviation that these stories accentuate. In effect, they listen for the preoccupation or the thematic problem around which the client organizes her or his life.

Having elicited stories about the preoccupation, counselors then can seek stories about the clients' projects in life, or what they plot doing about their preoccupations. To identify the projects, counselors may wish to listen to how clients try to become more whole; that is, to complete their stories by growing toward a subjectively defined final goal. Thus, they seek stories about identity. These stories make sense of the preoccupation by portraying intentions that mitigate or

comprehend deviations from the cultural pattern. These stories account for how the client plots to change herself or himself to better address the preoccupation. The type of stories that may be most useful to counselors in recognizing the life project are stories about clients' heroines and heroes because these role models delineate cultural scripts for problem solving that clients have intentionally adopted. The identity narratives provide the goal of the story and explain how clients seek completion through closing the gap between what they have experienced and what they want. These identity stories explain how clients attempt to move from a *felt minus* to a *perceived plus* (Adler, 1956). More specifically, the identity stories tell counselors how clients digest their experiences, remember events leading to crystallization of self, and rehearse ways of coping with life.

In connecting the preoccupation to the project, counselors usually recognize both the life theme and the actor's identity. It is then time to narrate the life theme to the client and collaborate on editing it. When the theme has been clarified, the client and counselor are ready to collaborate in using the theme to understand and resolve the career indecision. This requires that the counselor address directly the current indecision that clients use to hesitate before stepping into the future. The following prompting questions help clients to see their indecision as a purposeful pause in their line of movement into the future and prepare them to speak clearly and directly about what they want next in life.

- Under what circumstance was your indecision recognized?
- How does it feel to be undecided?
- Of what does the feeling remind you?
- Tell me an incident in which you had this same feeling.
- Do you have any idea of what haunts you?
- What part of your life story is most important to your current indecision?

After discussing the wavering in their line of movement, clients usually are ready to say what they hesitate to tell themselves, significant others, and their counselors. Now is the time for them to draw on their courage to say what they think about their project as a human being. Counselors offer the encouragement that clients need to authorize their story; to give voice to their ambition, that which clients hesitate to state.

Having clarified their indecision, clients are then well prepared to extend imaginative plot lines into the future. At this point, counselors explain to clients that interests address the heart of the impasse that constitutes indecision because interests express solutions to problems in growing up (Savickas, in press). Counselors may use clients' interests to guide story construction about how clients can use occupations to perfect incomplete gestalten, address unfinished situations, settle scores, or make up for things that were missing in childhood. In effect, counselors address the question "How can you use what you have already rehearsed?"

CASE STUDY

A case example may illustrate how one counselor sought to foster a client's career development by helping her to articulate a life theme that made explicit the pattern of her unfolding life, portrayed a clear and stable identity, and gave voice to her identity and ambitions for the future. The following are fragments of the case of a 20-year-old, female college sophomore whose father, preferring her to major in premed, arranged for her to receive counseling for her career indecision. The fragments illustrate how her counselor used stories that revealed her preoccupations and projects, clarified her life theme, and then related that theme to the client in a manner designed to resolve her career indecision. The case fragments deal with (a) family stories that reveal her preoccupation, (b) identity stories that show how she plots her life project, and (c) statements that locate the current indecision squarely within her life theme.

Family Stories

Little Girl Annoyed Because She Must Sit Still

We were going to an amusement park with my grandparents. I remember being in the back of the van. I was trying to sing and dance for my grandmother. She told me to sit down so that I would not get hurt. She said that I was getting on peoples' nerves. I tried to talk to my mother but she did not think that I should move around in the van.

Playful Girl Dreads Speaking With Relative

I remember a family reunion at grandmother's house, the other grandma. I was playing kick-the-can with my cousins. Grandma said "You kids behave." I did not know who all the people were so I did not want to talk with them. Grandma made me stop playing and come over to talk with them. She said I had to do it even if I did not know them because they knew who I was.

Mischievous Child Has Fun at First

A family that my parents met in Arizona came to visit. Their son made fun of the curlers in my hair. I teased him back. He started chasing me all over the yard. I ran by my dog where the boy could not get at me but he threw a stick and hit me in the eye. The two moms took me into the bedroom and tried to check my eye. They ended up taking me to the hospital. My eye was all right.

Identity Stories

When asked about her heroines as she was growing up, the client named five.

The lead character in a book called *Wrinkle in Time* because she thought up ways for friends to stick together in a showdown against creatures trying to take over some kids' minds.

Anne of Green Gables because Anne had spirit, temper ("I hide mine," she said), sets goals, does things just for fun, does what she wants, and has an imagination.

Laura of *Little House on the Prairie* because she had wild ideas of things to do, competed with others and outdid them, and ended up on the ground fighting.

The heroine in *The Search for Mary Kay Malloy* because she went from Ireland to America by herself.

"Laverne and Shirley" because they did things off the norm but without getting into trouble.

Relating Indecision to Life Theme

What were the circumstances under which your indecision was labeled?

I was getting bored in my classes. One of my professors asked was I sure about majoring in premed. He said that when he was in college he was not sure so he left college and joined the Army to travel and find himself. Him saying this made my indecision more of a reality to me. He permitted me to acknowledge my indecision and start to deal with it.

How does it feel to be undecided?

It feels okay now that my professor accepted it. I am failing at what I should do, that is make a choice. Floating in space, no direction, all dark.

What does this feeling remind you of?

Being out of control.

Tell me an incident in which you had this same feeling.

I feel out of control when I am depressed.

Tell me a story about when you were depressed recently.

My roommate has a way of triggering me. She is too emotional. She fought with her boyfriend and got real depressed. Then she got me depressed because of the things she would say. She expresses what I repress. When she says it, I end up feeling my feelings.

Do you have any idea of what haunts you?

I am afraid to make wrong choices. I would not live up to other peoples' expectations.

Tell me that part of your life story that is important to your career choice.

I was always undecided. In second grade I went out to get new shoes. After I wore them to school one day, I would take them back to get a different pair. The boy who sat next to me thought that I was rich because I had so many pairs of shoes but it was because I could not decide.

In making use of these three sets of responses, her counselor first looked to the family stories to find the preoccupation or thematic

problem. The three family stories were titled by the client and counselor working in collaboration. Just reading the three titles in sequence gives a strong indication of the story line in her self-constructed biography. The essence may be stated like a syllogism.

- A. People who love me view life as dangerous and thus over-protect me.
- B. I like to have fun, but they want me to stop playing and be safe.
- C. Therefore, I angrily sit still because rebellion only leads to pain.

Second, her counselor looked to the identity stories to learn about one of the client's life projects or what the client plots to do about her preoccupation. Her heroines suggest that she could be planning to form a group of friends who will support each other in the fight for personal independence, learn to express her creativity and have fun without getting in trouble, and maybe do this in part by traveling to other parts of the country.

Third, her counselor connected her preoccupation to her project. The client and counselor recognized the current indecision about a college major as another example of angrily sitting still while others direct her life. Although she sits still for it, she yearns to express her own ideas, which actually did include traveling.

Her indecision seemed to be hesitation about completing the premed major that her father had selected for her. It turned out that she wanted to major in mathematics, but did not know how to speak out about it to her father. Instead of discussing it with her father, she became undecided and depressed. She sat still! When her father noticed the depression, he decided to enlist a counselor to convince his daughter to become a physician.

Counseling consisted of the counselor narrating her life theme to the client, relating that theme to this incident of career indecision, and extrapolating the theme into the future by naming interests and occupations that address it. This activity confirmed the wisdom of her secret preference for a major in mathematics and identified occupations that she could explore. She liked mathematics because she could count on herself to solve problems yet could also check a solution to determine if it is correct. Counseling concluded with efforts to enhance her independence and assertiveness as well as encouragement to speak openly with her father. These efforts included behavioral counseling methods that addressed her assertiveness and interpersonal skills as well as person-centered methods that enhanced her self-esteem.

Follow-up 1 year later found her progressing well in her self-chosen major of mathematics, relating to her father well, making plans to move out of state to pursue a graduate degree in computer systems, and having spent the summer working in another state while living with a friend. She believed that her increased self-esteem and assertiveness evoked favorable responses from her father, which in turn

further encouraged her to become more self-directed in designing her own career.

CONCLUSION

Inscribing indecision as an attempt at making meaning during a transformation permits the conceptualization of counseling about career indecision as a process of articulating a client's life theme. During counseling, particular attention needs to be given to stories that reveal the pattern of the life in progress, invest the contemporary identity with meaning, and portray interests as future solutions to old problems. Narratives that situate career indecision in the context of a life theme, with its central preoccupation and corresponding plot, serve to clarify choices and enhance the ability to decide. When clients envision the future as a continuation of their stories, they can overcome their hesitation and author the next chapter.

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