

Life Planning for Self-Realization: Career Interests as Solutions

Mark L. Savickas

Transforming career counseling into life planning recasts the goal of vocational psychology from helping clients identify viable occupations to fostering their self-realization.

Prevailing views of vocational psychology concentrate on the match between a person and occupation. This view follows from the logical positivist philosophy of science that seeks objectivity in career guidance. Accordingly, vocational psychologists objectify people by measuring and profiling their interests and abilities. Psychologists then match these objective traits to occupational skills and reinforcers. Objectively matching person to position produces a fit that leads to job success.

Re-viewing career counseling from the vantage point of a constructivist philosophy of science moves the emphasis from objective to subjective fit. Life planning aids clients in their quest for meaning by determining how they can use life roles to complete needs that were unmet during childhood and to work out a central life project. Life planning fosters self-realization by showing clients how to turn their personal preoccupations into social occupations. Essentially, life planning for self-realization expands the agenda of career counseling by showing clients how to use career interests as solutions to problems in growing up and adapting to adult life.

The present paper uses four sections to explain interests as a blueprint for self-realization. The paper begins with a reexamination of the definition of interests from constructivist and contextualist perspectives. The definition is followed by a discussion of the origin of interests as problems in a person's life and the content of interests as proposed solutions to these problems. The

paper concludes with implications of these views for helping clients plan for self-realization as they design their lives.

Definition of Interests

Constructivism suggests that interests point to opportunities for self-realization. As noted by Angyal (1941, p. 126), interests are "symbolic elaborations of biospheric tensional states". Angyal's conception of interests as tensional relationships between an individual and the environment coincides well with the etymon of the word "interest". In Latin *inter* means between and *esse* means to be. The Middle English and Medieval Latin *interesse* was modified by Old French into *interest*, *est* being the third person singular of *esse* and meaning it is. Thus interest, meaning it is between, became the word to denote interests, concerns to one's advantage. So, interest denotes a relationship between the individual and the environment, to the advantage of the individual. This meaning is profound in its very simplicity. Interest is the motivational construct that symbolizes the relationship between individual and world. As Angyal (1941) pointed out, to lack interest means to run away from the world.

Content of Interest

Given that interests arise as a proposed solution to problems in growing up, the content of an individual's interest related directly to the problems that the individual encounters in struggling to develop. However, unlike earlier psychodynamic theorists, I do not conclude that individual problems shape the actual content of interests. In fact, interests are shaped by the solutions. Admittedly, the problems reveal a part of the life pattern of theme (Csizentmihaly & Beattie, 1979; Adler, 1956).

In fact, the problem which they wish to resolve above all others shows the core of the theme, the individual's chief preoccupation. For example, knowing that the overarching tension in a client's life is not to let her name die does not reveal interests. The problem shows the tension, not the intention.

Problems are formed and defined within the social matrix of the family of origin and later carried to and elaborated in the wider social environment. Where do answers come from? I believe that the simple answer to this

question is that role models present potential solutions to an individual's struggle to flourish.. Role models portray paths to self-realization offered within that society. The actions of the heroine or hero portray specific interests and attitudes as a means of actively mastering what was at first passively suffered. In short, tension is to theme as intention is to interests.

Interests originate with an ambition to become like the model. This ambition leads first to imitation of the model and later to role playing in reality. This role playing develops interests and skills that address the individual's chief preoccupation in life. In due course, an individual adds more models to address the nuances of the problem. One's collection of heroines and heroes is a collection of selves. At first, the collection of models are unrelated, not yet integrated. Eventually, adolescents integrate a coherent, selective identification from among the attitudes and skills which they have been rehearsing. They then allow certain characteristics to dominate, they rehearse these characteristics further, and when the characteristics become dependably recognizable (or enduring traits from the objective perspective), they constitute the person's style (or objective RIASEC code).

There are no isolated interests. All choices are embedded in pattern of living, in the unifying orientation revealed interests. Interests reveal the past in the present. To help the client plan a career, the counselor looks for the ambition behind interests because these same ambitions fuels the career.

Active mastery of problems through interests was referred to by Freud as the ego paradigm in which one turns suffering to strength and possibly even a social contribution. Milton, in *Paradise Lost* had Lucifer on his arrival in hell turn to his followers and announced, "Our torments shall become our element". Every individual makes her or his torments his element. In moving from victim to victor, the individual turns a tension into an intention. Freud called this pre-occupation with mastery the repetition compulsion and furthermore, viewed repetition with mastery as growth, and repetition without mastery as neurosis. In today's language we talk about effort attributions, self-efficacy, agency, internal locus of control rather than mastery but the meanings are fundamentally similar in that the individual reaches self-realization by converting a symptom into a strength. Interests show the

developmental pathway to self-realization.

Interests Plan for Self-Realization: Counseling Implications

Viewing interests as pathways to self-realization allows a counselor to help the client to view interests as a solution to problems in growing up and as a means of turning tension to intention, problem to opportunity, preoccupation into occupation. Interests are the best and most effective answer that the individual has found or formed so far. Counseling aids the client in the quest for sense by structuring the client's vocation (meaning "calling") into an "in-vocation of meaning". The counselor helps the client to make sense of life (interests) through articulating it. The counselor helps the client create meaning with a point of view. The client becomes more whole by saying what moves her or him: Articulation increases fullness.

In doing career counseling, the counselor creates, with the assistance of the client, a narrative version of the origin and purpose of the client's interests and how this purpose can clarify the client's career choices. The narrative should use the information drawn from the client to form a fictive truth and personal mythology for the client's life. The narrative should be like a novelization of the client's life, one that emphasizes a dramatization of interests as paths to self-realization. In short, the narrative should provide the client with a framework for knowing interests as a life project and a means of self-realization.

Conclusion

The constructivist view of occupational interests as indicators of subjective efforts to actively master what has been passively suffered augments the objective view of interests as patterns of likes and dislikes on interest inventories. Treating interests as solutions to problems in growing up conceptually ties interests to self-realization as well as provides a means whereby counselors can enhance an individual's efforts toward self-realization.

References

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