Career Counseling and Development of Adults:

Strategies, Skills and New Directions

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Abstract. *Career concerns can impede adult life span development. The present chapter describes knowledge, skills, and interventions counselors can use to help adults develop their careers more planfully and effectively.*

During the adult years, particular educational and vocational issues become salient for individuals in terms of their career development. For example, young adults face the imminent task of making vocational and educational choices that will shape their futures, yet many experience career indecision and may flounder (Salomone & Mangicaro, 1991) for years dissatisfied in school and/or various jobs. Similarly, personal events (e.g., job dissatisfaction, a disabling condition, divorce) or situational factors (e.g., economic recession, job loss, corporate downsizing) may move individuals at mid-life to reconsider their career choices and identify appropriate alternatives (Zunker, 1994, pp. 310-314). In later adult years, issues of preparing for retirement, disengaging from the work role (Super, 1990), and fostering post-retirement satisfaction often assume significance (Scott-Jensen, 1993). Any of these career-related issues, nested within the unique contexts of individual lives, may in turn impact upon adult psychological, interpersonal, and socioeconomic development.

Clearly, work comprises a significant part of adult life and in

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many ways forms and reflects individual identity and self-concept (Super, 1951). Work-related concerns can emerge at any stage of the life-span and impede vocational development and overall well-being. Counselors can intervene to help individuals remove barriers to their career development, resolve career concerns at various developmental phases, and revitalize their lives.

The present chapter synthesizes knowledge and skills counselors can use to help people shape and develop more planfully and effectively their careers, or what Richardson (1993) refers to as the place of work in their lives. Because of its renown, proven utility, and decidedly developmental focus, we use Donald Super's approach to pattern our discussion. Specifically, we review Super's (1990) adult career stages of establishment, maintenance, and disengagement and their associated developmental tasks. From this review, we describe intervention strategies counselors can use to assist adults to successfully cope with career stage tasks. We conclude by identifying some emerging directions in the career counseling and development of adult populations.

Super's Career Stages of Adulthood

Donald Super's (1957,1990) life-span, life-space approach to understanding career behavior specifies, in part, developmental tasks individuals confront in five career stages of Growth, Exploration, Establishment, Maintenance, and Disengagement. Task mastery enhances career success, satisfaction, and readiness to confront later stage tasks, whereas task failure impedes career development. Each stage task reflects issues with which society expects its members to cope. Counselors serve a vital role in guiding individuals through these stages and helping them deal with stage tasks.

Individuals typically move, or cycle, through the five career stages and confront tasks in an age-graded, or maturational sequence. People may also revisit, or recycle through, stages at various times in their lives in a process of adapting to internal and external changes (see Super & Knasel, 1981 for a discussion of career maturation and adaptation).

In the next three sections we describe Establishment, Maintenance, and Disengagement, and their accompanying developmental tasks, as the typical, or maturational career stages of adulthood. We then explain how counselors can (a) help clients identify their career stages and (b) select appropriate intervention strategies to aid clients in mastering stage tasks.

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Establishment

The childhood and adolescent years generally find people developing self-concepts (growth stage) and tentatively implementing them (exploration stage) to settle on suitable occupations. Following these phases of learning about self and trying out work roles, young adults from about 25 to 44 years of age typically strive to achieve permanence in their chosen fields of work. This 20-year period of endeavoring to attain occupational security and stability represents the establishment stage of career development.

Three developmental tasks, comprising separate substages, emerge during establishment. The first task, or substage, that adults confront involves stabilizing in a job or position (see Super, 1983, p. 7 for definitions). Stabilizing means settling into a new position and making it secure through competent performance and adapting successfully to the work culture. With increasing job stability, comfort, and fulfillment comes the second task of consolidating the position. Adult workers consolidate their positions by (a) demonstrating responsible and productive work behaviors and attitudes (e.g., completing assignments on time, working with involvement and zeal), (b) sustaining sound interpersonal relations (i.e., getting along with co-workers and supervisors), and (c) adjusting to existing and changing demands of the work environment. With a position now stabilized and consolidated, a third task, or substage, of advancing emerges for workers who desire and have opportunities for mobility to higher-level positions. Adults seeking advancement benefit from setting realistic goals and identifying career paths and developing strategies that will allow achievement of those goals. Successful establishment ultimately translates for adults into stable self-concepts, career patterns, and locations in the world of work.

Maintenance

After establishing themselves in their positions adults between the ages of 45 and 65 typically confront a choice: "Should I stay in my current position or reestablish in a new one?" In making this choice, adults may invest several years pondering whether or not they want to do their present work long term. Those people who choose to leave their positions often transition to new positions or occupational fields through further exploring and establishing. Those who stay in their established positions try to preserve and enhance their niches in the world of work by continually adjusting to their vocational situations. The concern of such people with preserving and enhancing a position during middle adulthood sig-

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nals the career stage of maintenance.

For adults at mid-life, maintaining a place created in the work world requires holding onto an achieved position. People hold a position by continually adapting to its changing demands, sustaining interest in it, and performing proficiently. Career maintenance also involves updating and innovating tasks. To update, workers expand their knowledge and skills to excel and refine their job competencies. Workers innovate by developing new and creative ways of completing tasks or contributing to their fields. Innovating may also enable individuals who lack opportunity for further vertical career mobility to cope with career plateaus (Bardwick, 1986; Patterson et al., 1987) or circumvent mid-career changes due to job dissatisfaction or boredom. Successful maintainers keep their positions, gain fresh knowledge and skills, and continually invent unique ways of fulfilling their self-concepts.

Although not articulated by Super, others (Murphy & Burck, 1976) have proposed a "renewal" stage in which adults between ages 35 and 45 reevaluate their self-concepts and either readjust or reestablish their careers. Research supports a renewal task or stage (Williams & Savickas, 1990) "as a transitional period between the establishment and maintenance stages" characterized by "questioning future direction and goals...[and] encountered primarily by younger maintainers" (p. 173). Williams and Savickas (1990) contend that maintenance stage tasks may well reflect an adaptive process rather than maturational "age-related social expectations encountered in a reasonably predictable series" (p. 174). Thus, adapting to change (e.g., in life role salience, in employment conditions or status) seems to represent a more global coping process encompassing each of the maintenance tasks of holding, updating, and innovating.

Disengagement

Adults nearing age 60 begin to decelerate their work loads and productivity levels. Work activities gradually decrease as issues of retirement and post-occupational life surface with greater intensity. People may ask themselves during this period of disengagement, "What will retirement mean for me?" or "How will I adjust?" The older adult frequently must cope with retirement planning tasks of organizing finances, scheduling daily activities, and establishing a new life-style. Adults in their late 60s who have disengaged from the work role often face retirement living tasks such as settling on a place to live, pursuing meaningful leisure activities, and shifting energies to home and family.

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Career Stages and Life Role Salience

Adults occupy and impart different degrees of significance to various life roles as they cycle and/or recycle through each career stage (Super, 1990). Understanding this idea prompts counselors to also consider the importance adult clients place on study, work, community, home and family, and leisure roles at different stages of the life span. The Salience Inventory (SI; Nevill & Super, 1986) gives counselors a useful tool for determining the importance, or salience, of these life roles. Results of the SI can be used in conjunction with knowledge of career stages to conceptualize adult career development issues more fully, particularly as they emerge within a client's unique cultural context.

Summary

Career development for adults means successfully managing socially expected work-related tasks. Adults typically confront these tasks in career stages during which they establish, maintain, and disengage from satisfying and meaningful places in the world of work. The meaning adults derive from the role of worker in relation to other life roles has significant implications for career counseling. The next section describes how counselors can use knowledge of career stages and associated tasks, within the context of life roles, to conduct developmental career counseling with adults.

Adult Career Stage Counseling: Applying Super's Theory

Counselors apply Super's model to developmental career counseling with adults by helping them identify and learn to cope with career stage tasks. Consequently, adults increase their vocational adaptation as measured by job satisfaction and success.

The first step in using Super's model involves identifying a client's current career stage based on the foregoing explanations. Counselors use their knowledge of career stages and techniques such as empathic listening, open-ended leads, and probing questions to develop hypotheses about clients' immediate vocational concerns (see Sharf, 1992, pp. 184-190 for examples). Counselors can also administer the Adult Career Concerns Inventory (ACCI; Super, Thompson, & Lindeman, 1988) to assess the vocational developmental tasks adults confront and to classify those tasks in terms of the developmental career stages outlined above and yielded in an ACCI Career Stage Profile. The Career Stage Profile shows graphically the career stage and developmental tasks of greatest concern to the client. As a measure of adult planning attitudes and planfulness, the ACCI thus helps to reveal what concerns

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people have about their careers (e.g., "Planning how to get ahead in my established field of work"; "Having a good place to live in retirement") and how they cope or fail to cope with those concerns. Realizing that adult career development often unfolds non-linearly, the ACCI also proves especially useful for identifying "individuals who may be in the process of recycling through career stages and, therefore, in need of additional counseling assistance" (Herr & Niles, 1988, p. 164). Additional assistance may involve building clients' self-knowledge through interest, aptitude, values, personality, and/or other assessments, as well as encouraging clients to explore new occupational roles and transition to the establishment stage.

The importance of work relative to other life roles can also be assessed informally through client-counselor dialogue about the meaning of those roles (Savickas, 1991) and/or formally using the SI. Assessing life role salience allows counselors to determine the status of life roles for clients as they confront career stage tasks.

Having identified a client's career stage and life role salience, the counselor then intervenes in the second step to assist the client to learn the tacit knowledge and practical skills necessary for managing stage tasks, balancing various life roles, and for successful career planning. Counselors can assist clients to develop effective strategies for dealing with career stage tasks using the following coping skill lists developed in part from the career stage tasks described earlier.

Establishment Stage Coping Skills

Coping with socially expected establishment tasks involves developing skills for stablizing, consolidating, and advancing. Brief annotated skill lists for these tasks, adapted from Dix (1992), follow.

To stabilize and consolidate:

(1) Become a team player. Align and nurture relationships with supervisors and coworkers rather than only promote a personal agenda. Identify with and show a desire to promote workplace goals by deemphasizing personal gains, recognizing coworker accomplishments, and listening to others.

(2) Understand the workplace. Make a concerted effort to learn everything about the work environment. Seize the initiative to develop an organizational chart, learn work tasks, foster confidence in personal abilities, and discover what it takes to settle into the position by using the expertise of mentors, supervisors, and others.

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(3) Set high personal performance standards. Expend a reasonable effort to "go beyond the call of duty." Work hard to accomplish organizational goals beyond what might be expected and assess productivity through internal (i.e., personal) and external (e.g., supervisory, coworker) feedback.

(4) Demonstrate adaptability and flexibility. By bolstering personal workplace competency and self-confidence, remain open to changing self without feeling hurt or alienated. Develop skills of pacing work load and activities, diplomacy in interpersonal workplace relations, and adapting to workplace norms.

To Advance:

(1) Update and maintain knowledge and expertise. Participate in seminars, workshops, conferences, and in-service training opportunities to enhance and upgrade job skills. Establish professional development goals annually. Identify long-term goals and create realistic action plans (objectives) to achieve those goals.

(2) Be actively involved in the work communities. Serve on committees, take leadership roles, and communicate with peers in the workplace. Network, establish, and nurture contacts beyond the local level. Observe and learn from people who have advanced.

(3) Pursue fresh challenges. Discover alternative methods of completing job assignments. Assume responsibilities that involve new and stimulating demands to show readiness for vertical career movement.

Maintenance Stage Coping Skills

Career maintenance may involve fundamental adaptational (i.e., non-age related) responses to change encompassing more specfic maturational (i.e., age-related) career stage tasks (Williams & Savickas, 1990). To help adults cope successfully with career maintenance, counselors may therefore need to consider individual adaptive coping styles within the context of the maintenance stage tasks. Counselors might explore what Williams and Savickas discussed as possible behavioral coping strategies adults use (e.g., continuing education) to maintain their positions. Using the following skill lists, counselors can also assist clients to cope with specific maintenance stage tasks of holding, updating, and innovating.

To hold, update, and innovate:

(1) Ascertain future direction. Resolve questions of long-term commitment by weighing pros and cons of changing or staying in a current position or occupational field. Evaluate how well the posi-

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tion allows for implementing self-concept and for adapting to changes in life-role salience.

(2) Secure what has been achieved. Maintain a steady level of performance to remain competetive, successful, and an asset to the workplace as younger workers, technological, and other changes emerge.

(3) Stay abreast of advances in the field. Cultivate a personal knowledge of and an ongoing interest in new job developments and emerging occupational trends through reading, self-study, and other activities.

(4) Alter job focus. Explore alternative dimensions of the job, re-focus self on different aspects of work, and create novel ways of completing assignments.

Disengagement Stage Coping Skills

Adjusting to retirement and disengaging from the work role pose an immediate challenge to the older adult (Jensen-Scott, 1993). This challenge often comprises adapting to financial, personal identity, social, health, and other changes. Counselors now more than ever can intervene to help older adults adapt to retirement and its concomitant life-style changes as the number of people at or reaching retirement age escalates. Successful intervention means assisting older adults to cope with retirement planning and living tasks. Counselors can accomplish this through reframing and psychoeducational techniques (Zunker, 1994, pp.303-304) as well as by assessing and responding to specific individual concerns (Jensen-Scott, 1993).

Conclusion

Nearing the dawn of the new millenium, counselors maneuver to construct a more appropriate system of counseling theory, research, and practice. They seek to adopt strategies and conceptual schemes that include diverse and multiple perspectives. Adopting a multiple perspective framework reflects what some writers (e.g., Lather, 1991; Savickas, 1993) have described as the USA's movement into the postmodern era. Savickas (1993) proposed that the postmodern era may well usher in a new "development" work ethic for the 21st century and thereby bolster the developmental model "as the major paradigm sustaining counseling" (p. 209). If this prophecy materializes, then the refinement and use of developmental models, such as that described in the present chapter, in career counseling with adults seems most appropriate.

Career counselors and researchers have already begun to expand the traditional trait-factor model to include approaches that

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account for more personal rather than objective constructions of reality (Savickas, 1993). One very promising and innovative developmental-constructivist model emerging in the career counseling and development literature derives from the narrative paradigm. In this model careers represent individual life stories which counselors can explore interpretively with clients. For adults clients, perceiving careers as stories empowers them to wright scripts and develop in ways that have meaning for them in terms of their own personally and socially constructed reality.

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