

**Building Human Strength: Career Counseling's Contribution
to a Taxonomy for Positive Psychology**

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Taxonomy for Positive Psychology**

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During his term as president of the American Psychological Association, Martin E. P. Seligman (1998a) identified "building human strength" as psychology's forgotten mission. Unfortunately, in drawing this conclusion Seligman overgeneralized. Maybe clinical psychology has neglected positive development, but counseling psychology has never forgotten the importance of developmental and preventative approaches to helping people cope with life's challenges. Neither has counseling psychology treated clients as passive recipients of external reinforcement and shaping, a second deficit of psychology according to Seligman (1998a). Counseling psychology has always viewed people as active shapers of their own lives and producers of their own development.

Seligman asserted that, because of neglect, fundamental questions remain unanswered, giving as an example the question of "How can we prevent problems like depression and substance abuse?" To address this neglect, Seligman proposed constructing a new science of building human strength that will foster in young people virtues such as courage, optimism, interpersonal skill, hope, perseverance, and a work ethic. Unbeknownst to Seligman, counseling psychology has pursued just this mission since its inception as the field of vocational guidance. In fact, Leona Tyler (1969, p. 10) asserted that "the psychological purpose of counseling is to facilitate development." Counselors intervene systematically to build human

strengths and thereby increase coping effectiveness. This coincides with Seligman's (1998b) definition of positive psychology's purpose as measuring, understanding, and building human strengths and civic virtues. Although not cited by Seligman (1998a) in his article about the failure of psychology to attend to positive development, counseling psychology's main achievements and contributions have been in constructing models, methods, and materials that build human strength.

In a second article, Seligman (1998b) asserted that "positive psychology needs a taxonomy...to guide the formulation and building of the *good life*. Constructing a taxonomy of human strengths is an interesting project both because of its theoretical importance and its practical applications. Counseling psychologists have constructed several such taxonomies over the last fifty years. These taxonomies usually describe human strengths as the coping attitudes and skills needed to respond to the developmental tasks that society imposes on its citizens (e.g., Blocher, 1974; Havinghurst, 1948). Coping behaviors are the instrumental acts that exercise the human strengths needed to achieve the *good life* described by Seligman (1998b).

Career counselors have been particularly active in proposing taxonomies of human strengths as a means of operationally defining the domain and goals of developmental career counseling. Career development taxonomies (e.g., Hershenson, 1968; Super, 1963; Tiedeman, 1963) generally organize the coping

behaviors using Erikson's (1968) epigenetic framework of character strengths or "virtues." The vocational development taxonomies identify how these fundamental human strengths are exercised as vocational coping behaviors in the career domain. The coping behaviors catalogued in career development taxonomies are viewed as the actual processes of human development and the mechanisms of positive change. For example, the human strength of hope is exercised in planful attitudes and planning behaviors; hope is the foundation of psychosocial ontogeny (Erikson, 1968) and, in parallel, planfulness is the fundamental variable in all models of career maturation (Super, 1983).

By career counseling, and I include career education here, I mean developmental interventions that build the human strengths and practice the coping responses that individuals need to choose an occupation and secure a place in it. I do not mean vocational guidance that uses the psychology of individual differences to match people to fitting positions. Developmental counseling concentrates on differences within the same person at two or more points-in-time. Nevertheless, I should mention that Holland's (1997) hexagonal model of coping orientations serves as a viable taxonomy of *psychological* strengths. In contrast, career development models are taxonomies of *psychosocial* strengths and may be more useful in considering how to build the human strengths identified by Seligman. Counselors use career models to assess developmental delays and distortions in building human strengths and then prescribe interventions to further

develop the strengths an individual needs to cope more effectively with the situations she or he encounters. Career counseling is applied human development in which counselors engage clients in activities that exercise human strengths in order to train and build them. Counseling usually ends with the counselor attempting to generalize the strength for use in other domains of life.

For the purpose of identifying the human strengths and the coping responses on which career intervention concentrates, I have grouped the coping responses into six categories: concern, control, conviction, competence, commitment, and connection. In the remainder of this paper, I will describe the variables that exercise each of these human strengths as well as succinctly indicate how the career counseling builds these strengths.

HOPING: Developing Career Concern

(Hoping meaning to look forward with confidence.)

A mainstay of a healthy personality in Western culture is a future orientation. Without this sense that the future is real and that one can prepare to meet it, people feel pessimistic and hopeless. Populating the future with anticipated events makes the future feel real and usually heightens the sense of continuity that present behavior is connected to future outcomes as well as increases optimism about the achievability of goals. Career counseling makes individuals aware of vocational development tasks and how they can cope with them. Career counseling fosters the development of a forward looking orientation

by increasing individuals' planfulness regarding how they will respond to the societal expectation that they work. More importantly career counseling helps client to dream and, thereby, design their lives. Specific interventions that build the human strength of hoping by exercising career concern include The Real Game, Adkin's Life Skills Program, time perspective workshops, and writing future autobiographies.

WILLING: Developing Career Control

(Willing meaning the use of volition.)

A sense of confidence in one's vocational future leads to concern about who owns that future. Thus a second human strength developed through career counseling is a sense of control over one's vocational future. Individuals who fail to develop a sense of career control, and thus continue to rely upon other people to shape their vocational future, seem to be persistently concerned with dependency issues. Career counseling increases the human strength of willing by exercising decision-making skills and assertive behavior. Specific interventions include assertiveness training, decision-making training, and attribution retraining including making effort attributions for success.

PURPOSING: Developing Career Convictions

(Purposing meaning the determination of aims and goals.)

A sense of control over one's vocational future leads to concern with what to do with one's own future. Thus a third human strength is exploring convictions

about the meaning of work and its place in one's life as well as a willingness to cooperate with people and contribute to one's community. Individuals who fail to develop career convictions that appropriately respond to community expectations seem to be egocentrically concerned with only themselves and their own perspectives. The formation of career convictions about the salience of social roles such as work, friendship, and play, requires information about opportunities and identification of role models. Career counseling increases the human strength of purposing by exercising exploratory behavior. Career counseling fosters the development of personal convictions by helping clients learn how to explore their environments and their values. Specific interventions include training in information-seeking behavior, values clarification exercises, achievement motivation training, and goal setting exercises.

ENDEAVORING: Developing Career Competence

(Endeavoring meaning industrious effort toward a goal)

Having established convictions and a life plan, individuals usually wonder if they are capable of reaching their goals. Thus a fourth human strength is a sense of competence or feeling equal to meeting the demands of one's vocational future— or courage. In this context, competence refers not to skill but to the feeling that one is sufficient to respond to the demand of life. A sense of career competence produces self-esteem and increases belief in one's self-efficacy. Individuals who fail to develop a sense of competence seem to be persistently

concerned with self-perceived weaknesses and inadequacies when they consider their work lives. They focus more on how they are doing than what they are doing and thus seem hesitant to pursue their goals and commit themselves to an identity. They need the courage to be imperfect. Specific interventions include Adlerian encouragement exercises, Transactional Analysis training, and workshops that increase self-esteem and self-efficacy.

COMMITTING: Developing Career Choices

(Committing meaning to put oneself into place and to obligate oneself)

Developing a pattern of competencies leads one to commit to a self-chosen identity, especially through the tangible choice of an occupation. To help foster identity commitment, counselors assist clients in their self-exploration of abilities, interests, and values. Identifying dependable strengths and enduring interests increases self-knowledge that, in turn, enables individuals to choose among occupational alternatives and possible selves. While this self-knowledge is important, Valliant has cogently identified self-exploration as the single most important coping skill for leading a successful and satisfying life. Specific interventions include the traditional vocational guidance methods of test interpretation, autobiographical writing, person-centered counseling, vocational choice workshops, and career education classes.

CONNECTING: Developing stable relationships

(Connecting meaning to establish relationships.)

Individuals who have made an identity commitment, that may include choice of an occupation, then need to implement that self-concept. Counselors can help clients learn how present themselves and secure positions in the chosen field and then stabilize in a congruent position. Individuals who encounter difficulties in negotiating transitions (e.g., school-to-work, home to work) and establishing themselves in an occupation and other community roles usually need to learn social skills that enhance their ability to establish effective relationships with diverse individuals in manifold contexts. Specific interventions include conflict resolution, social skills training, group counseling,

Summary

The virtues listed by Seligman (1998a; i.e., courage, optimism, interpersonal skill, hope, perseverance, and a work ethic) are each subsumed in this taxonomy of career coping behaviors. In brief, career concern includes a hopeful and optimistic future orientation that fosters involvement in thinking about and planning one's life. Career control arises from exercising decision making, interpersonal assertiveness, compromise, and self-determination. Career conviction is rooted in values which serve to guide one's life, including a strong work ethic. Career competence involves the self-esteem and self-efficacy that lead individuals to believe they're able to meet the challenges that life presents and to achieve the important outcomes that they value. And finally, commitment involves identifying oneself in a community and connecting to other people in that

community through life roles work, family, leisure, and citizenship. Clearly, career education and counseling concentrate on building, through exercise of vocational coping behaviors, the human strengths to which Seligman refers. Hopefully, as the American Psychological Association advances the positive science that Seligman envisions they will build on, or at least consider, the foundation provided by counseling psychology in general and career counseling in particular.

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