

Career Counseling in the Postmodern Era

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Abstract

As we approach the turn of the millennium, our society moves to a new vantage point from which to view the work role and career development. Hallmarks of the modern era such as logical positivism, objectivistic science, and industrialism are being questioned as we decenter from an "us versus them" singular perspective toward a multiple perspective discourse. All indicators suggest the move from seeking truth to participation in conversations; from objectivity to perspectivity. In tune with these societal changes, career counseling seems to be reforming itself into an interpretive discipline in which practitioners help individuals to relate their quest for meaning to the division of labor in their community. The postmodern era already has engendered six innovations in counseling for career development.

Career Counseling in the Postmodern Era

As we approach the turn of the millennium, our society moves to a new vantage point from which to view the work role and career development. Counseling for career development must keep pace with our society's movement to a postmodern era. Thus, counselors must innovate their career interventions to fit the new zeitgeist. Six specific innovations in career counseling for the postmodern era are described in the third and final section of this paper. The first section explains how views on the work role and career development have changed as our society evolved and the second section delineates how our society is currently evolving into a postindustrial society in preparation for the postmodern era.

Vocational and Career Ethics

As a society, we can expect to change our work ethic as we stand on the threshold of a new century because Americans have done it the last two times that a century turned (Maccoby, 1981). During the 19th century, our society espoused a "vocational ethic" of work that valued independent effort, self-sufficiency, frugality, self-discipline, and humility. The ethic was best articulated by Benjamin Franklin and most clearly enacted by craftspeople and farmers. The vocational ethic was a secular version of the work ethic brought to this continent by the Puritans. The vocational ethic fit the Romantic atmosphere of the 19th century, a time during which feelings dominated. Bruner (1986) noted that Romantic "conceptualism" asserted that meaning is in person. Because motivation and meaning resided in the person, the path to success and personal fulfillment was through self-expression and individual effort. Thus, the vocational ethic encouraged passion, genius, and creativity in all work. Workers were to be genuine or authentic and express their core

identities. The choice of a particular occupation typically followed the family tradition such as staying on the family farm or taking over the family business. Individuals who choose not to do the family's work were expected to chose an authentic work role through a vision quest or vocational retreat.

A few individuals turned their vocational passion into a risktaking and empire building that served to organize the craftspeople into companies and to build large cities around industries. The craftspeople, farmers, and small business operators retained, and still retain to this day, their vocational ethic. However, individuals organized into companies found little reinforcement for independence, self-sufficiency, and self-management. Companies of workers needed a new work ethic as the USA entered the 20th century

Companies brought us the 20th century career ethic. We did not have careers until large organizations emerged. Self-employment on farms and small business was replaced for many workers with the challenge of working for someone else and moving up the corporate ladder. The ladder remains the ultimate metaphor for a career. Large organizations and city life changed work from a calling from God to what who your neighbors call you. Occupational titles serve to place the worker in the organizational hierarchy and to define one's social identity for the group.

While the career ethic replaced the vocational ethic, 20th century logical positivism replaced 19th century conceptualism. Unlike conceptualism which holds that meaning is in the person, positivism holds that meaning is in the world and thus values facts over feelings. 20th century science replaced Romantic passion, creativity, self-expression with an emphasis on reason, observation, and accuracy. Some scientists proclaimed the death of the

subject (and the subjective perspective) as they rigorously studied objects in the world. As a society we eventually learned to demand a singular truth and to rely on objective methodology to discover it in the world. In work-role counseling we followed Parson's lead in applying the scientific method to fostering career choice. While scientists were objectifying the world, counselors objectified interests, values, and abilities with inventories and used these inventories to guide people to where they fit in organizations. Thus, career development professionals participated fully in the societal move to increase domination of the subjective by the objective.

The career ethic or hierarchical view of life was apparent in motivation theories used by counselors. Maslow's hierarchy of needs fit the model of moving up the ladder just like General Motors car models reflected rungs on that ladder (i.e, from Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Buick, to Cadillac). Meaning and self-development as moving up is still apparent in our emphasis on career development stages and counseling interventions that foster rational planning and self-marketing. Counseling models and methods fit the spirit of the age, as they must if clients are to accept them as useful.

However, the spirit of the age is changing. As we approach the year 2000, USA society is disappointed in authority and organizations. What once led the country to prosperity is being diagnosed as the underlying cause of contemporary social problems. Yesterday's solutions are today's problems. In the work realm, the career ethic is under severe attack because the organizations and bureaucracies which it served are disappearing. The career ethic does not further the move from industry to information, from bureaucracy to teams, from electromechanical to electronic, and from competition to cooperation. As the millennium turns, the career ethic seems less and less

useful.

Trends in personal values also have made us question the career ethic. The career ethic begat competition and a vertical view of life. Individuals are less willing to sacrifice everything for their careers. We hear cries from the hearts of individuals who feel betrayed by their organizations, anxious about competing, insecure about future, tired of self-marketing, and lonely because they left friends and communities behind as they moved up the career ladder (Maccoby, 1981). These symptoms suggest that our society and its view of work is changing. So, we are led to ask what fundamental transformation are we experiencing?

Moving Beyond Positivism and an Industrial Society

Positivism as a path to truth is under attack. Throughout the century, and especially during the last decade, Americans have been ambivalent about objectivistic science. On the one hand, it has given us penicillin, cars, telecommunications, food, compact disks, televisions, airplanes. On the other hand, it has given us bombs, air pollution, holes in the ozone layer, and Dalkon shields. As long as our society was univocal and believed in authoritative/singular meaning, we accepted the view that the positive contributions of science were benefactions attributable to science itself but the negative contributions were misuses attributable to monolithic organizations and politicians (Harding, 1991).

This ambivalence about objectivistic science has been exacerbated by social and economic trends that mark our approach to the year 2,000. The major social trend that has raised concern about positivistic science is the USA's move toward multiculturalism. As long as our society acted as if it was monocultural, the issue of objective truth remained on the margins. However,

as the USA moves to affirm its multiculturalism, definitions of truth become the center. As diverse cultural groups gain voice, they articulate their vantage points as a claim to knowledge and power. Objects that had been previously subjected to a singular, authoritative interpretation by the representatives of the dominant culture are now subjected to multiple perspectives. No longer does the country share a singular truth articulated in univocal fashion. Groups now ask what is right and wrong from the perspective that we have taken, not what is the truth. The new question of what is right and wrong about a particular perspective points us to ask, "what perspective is most useful for this particular context?" Thus the goal of meaning making is becoming a quest for usefulness rather than the pursuit of truth. The objective methodology of positivistic science, long considered the path to truth, becomes a perspective among other perspectives when we recognize that interpretive communities create truth based on their cultural perspective and goals (Gergen, 1991).

Like positivism, the industrial society we have known seems to be in incipient decline as we move to a postindustrial society or information age. The rules of positivistic inquiry guided the construction of industries that made products, especially those using an assembly line. Today, 70% of Americans work to provide services not produce goods. (The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines service at transportation, public utilities, government, retail and wholesale, health, insurance, entertainment, real estate, personal and professional service included doctors, lawyers.) With automation replacing repetitive jobs, the workers who remain must take responsibility for the whole job. Computers make diagnoses and solve problems, leaving humans to provide care, helpfulness, and understanding. Career paths are harder to find

as bureaucracies downsize and life-long employment with one organization becomes a thing of the past. The career ethic falters with no path to follow or ladder to climb.

Move toward Perspectivity

It is certain that our society is taking a fundamental step beyond positivism, objectivistic science, and industrialism. However, the question of what we are moving toward remains unanswered. A tentative answer lies in the postmodern discourse in social science (Lather, 1991). Postmodern refers to cultural shift of postindustrialism. Table 1 lists some of the shifts that we are experiencing. Postmodernism recognizes that culture and language provide the symbolic world in which we live, and they constitute meaning making and use (Bruner, 1990). Romantic conceptualism sees meaning in the person and modern positivism sees meaning in world (Is it true? Accurate?). Postmodern interpretivism sees meaning in the word (Why did she say that? Is it useful or interesting?) It appears that our society is turning from internal feelings and external facts to interactional perspectives. If we believe that objects are products of perspective, then we redirect our attention discovering truth in objective reality to understanding truth as a socially constructed version of reality. Truth is determined by the perspective brought to bear by a community of understanding. As an interpretive community we must decide what is socially useful, interesting, and reasonable not what is right. To decide as a community, we must appreciate multiple perspectives and emphasize our relationship to each other. This entails a shift from emphasizing abstract principles to emphasizing social participation. Taylor (1989, p. 509) explained that in addition to

reason advancing by increasing domination of the object by the subject, reason also increases by search for consensus. As society, we seem to be decentering from an "us versus them" singular perspective toward a multiple perspective discourse. All points suggest the move from seeking truth to participation in conversations; from objectivity to perspectivity.

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A Work Ethic for the 21st Century

Maccoby (1981) has forecasted that the new work ethic for the 21st century will be self-development. If so, and his argument is persuasive, then the goal of career counseling will shift from supporting careerism to fostering self-affirmation and improved decision making. Counselors will teach people to be more critical of authority. Becoming more self-realized will mean becoming more social not becoming more autonomous. People will need to be encouraged to make a commitment to their culture and community as well as learn to develop their values in the real world.

If self-development replaces career development, then the developmental model remains as the major paradigm sustaining counseling. Like most other contemporary enterprises, modernist career development theory is a product of positivism and objective science. It has focused on the theme of development as movement toward better fit or person-environment match. Career development theory's regent constructs have dealt with the objective career rather than the subjective career. To help people fit the organization, career theory has relied on constructs such as congruence and objectivist methods such as interest inventories and aptitude tests. The construct of fit which is so central to trait-and-factor models has been augmented by the construct of

developmental readiness or maturity. However, development has been conceived of in terms of society not self. For example, developmental tasks are social expectations; identity means recognizable by the community as well as stable; and maturity means that the future is more important than the present. Thus, congruence, developmental tasks, vocational identity, and career maturity all reflect the perspective of objective science as it has been expressed during the 20th century.

Counseling for Career Development in a Postmodern Era

To foster self-developers, we need to augment these objective constructs, not replace them. Modernists constructs will remain important in the postmodern 21st century but they can no longer be meaningful in an abstract, essentialist, decontextualized sense. Postmodernism prefers particulars over principles and situated knowledge over decontextualized abstracts. The postmodern era already has spawned, or at least coincides with, the emergence of six innovations in counseling for career development.

1. No more experts. The first innovation that we are witnessing as we move toward the new millennium is the transformation of counselors from agents of the dominant culture to "cultural workers" (Giroux, 1992) who cross the borders of domesticating definitions. No longer content to be "representatives of the commonsense," career counselors are undertaking the new project of removing barriers that keep people from speaking for themselves. In accepting the postmodern rallying cry of "no more experts" (Lather, 1991), career counselors are unlearning their own privileges. Instead of positioning clients as recipients of pre-defined services such as interest inventories, career counselors are affirming clients as agents interpreting their needs and shaping their lives out of a range possibilities. Counselors

are getting outside the frame of seeing the client as the problem and the counselor as the solution. More and more career counselors characterize their clients with heterogeneity, irreducible particulars, and incalculable differences. Instead of portraying themselves as masters of truth, counselors are creating a space where those involved can speak and act for themselves.

2. Enable rather than fit. Counselors who want to help people to articulate their experience and construct their own lives doubt that person-environment fit can remain the cardinal construct in career development theory. Some counselors believe that fit must be replaced as the central construct because multiculturalism has moved from the margins to the center. A modernist project has been to "normalize" or socialize individuals with diverse cultures to fit the mainstream culture. Moreover, individuals and groups who were "misfits" because of class, gender, race, or sexual orientation were subjected to "normalizing" discourse. Now, the metaphor of the culture *melting pot* is being replaced by metaphor of a *salad bowl* in which diverse cultures mix together yet each retains its integrity. Diversity is being affirmed and valued rather than normalized. Accordingly, fit is being augmented with constructs such as "enable" (Law, 1991). Career counseling for enablement nourishes the expressive freedom to draw up one's own life plan.

3. Rewrite the grand narrative. To enable clients in their quest to invent a workable personal framework for their lives requires that career counselors broaden their focus beyond fixation on the work role. According to the *Grand Narrative of the 20th century* [i.e., society advances toward the new better or new with the gradual yet steady progress of reason and freedom and the forward march of human productive capacities], the work role provides the chief tie to reality and bestows a social identity. However, no framework or

grand narrative is shared by everyone in a multicultural society. Counselors increasingly recognize that theories of human development are right only for the context and culture within which they were forged. Different cultures provide different paths of development. We cannot apply one grand narrative to everyone and continue to inculcate the Puritan work ethic which makes career salient and work role central. In the next century, life design will subsume occupational choice. Therefore, career counselors are devising new constructs which are more fundamental than fitting individuals to occupational roles. Counselors are becoming increasingly concerned with how clients structure the basic roles of work, play, friendship, and family into a life (Super, 1980). The idea of counseling about life structure accommodates multiple perspectives. Contemporary life-role counseling (Brown, 1988; Hansen, 1989) affirms the multiple perspectives of diverse groups and thus addresses the relation of the work role to other roles and the effects a career or work-role choice will have on interpersonal relationships, children, and the community. Increasingly, career counselors will attend to life design and the place of the work role in the constellation of life roles.

4. Career is personal. When the work role is no longer artificially isolated from other life roles, counselors view the distinction between personal and career counseling as a wall created by words. The conceptual economy that favors the oppositional dichotomy of personal versus career counseling falters when counselors think of life-design counseling. The dichotomy, in turn, becomes a continuum of relative degree. The century long separation between counseling about the work role and counseling about life (psychotherapy) is under escalating attack as shown by recent programs at professional conventions and articles in scholarly journals. The postmodern

turn shows that a career is very personal to the individual.

5. Career development theory is not counseling theory. When they focus on *career counseling process rather than vocational guidance*, counselors notice that we do not have a career counseling theory. Instead, we have theories about how people choose occupations and develop their careers. What career theories teach us about our clients vocational behavior is critically important but it is no longer being mistaken as career counseling theory. In lieu of a career counseling theory, and without really noticing it, many career counselors have relied upon objective guidance techniques (Williamson, Darley, & Paterson, 1937) or subjective client-centered counseling procedures (Rogers & Wallen, 1946). As postmodernism replaces subjectivity and objectivity with perspectivity, counselors are beginning to devise career counseling theories that spring from hermeneutical activity. These embryonic theories of career counseling concentrate on the invocation of meaning to understand decision making and to structure careers. The client's attempts to determine a direction in life are viewed as meaning making or a quest for sense. The quest is not one of discovery but one of invention and construction. Career counseling thus becomes co-construction or social construction of meaning. The counseling process is one of making meaning.

6. Stories rather than scores. With the elaboration of the counseling process as meaning making, we see increased use of the narrative paradigm. An aspect of the modernist project that formed vocational guidance was the singular focus on the objective career, that is, the work positions that one occupies during her or his life cycle. As noted herein, the goal of vocational guidance has been to match people to fitting positions. To facilitate matching, individuals were objectified by scores they received on

measures of constructs such as self-concept, aptitudes, interests, and work values. However, from the postmodern perspective we realize that individual difference variables do not exist for the subject; they exist within the counselor's seemingly objective view. What exists for individuals is purpose, not positions on a normal curve. Counselors are now becoming increasingly interested in augmenting their interventions by addressing the individual's subjective career, that is life story. Comprehensive career counseling attends to both the public/objective meaning and the private/subjective meaning of interests, abilities, values, and choices. For example, from the objective perspective an interest means a stronger than average preference for something in comparison to a normative group. From the subjective perspective, an interest means a solutions to a problem in growing up. In a similar fashion, developmental tasks can be viewed as social expectations or existential themes; identity can be viewed as predictable behavior or striving for inner continuity; and values can be viewed as general goals or expressions of meaning making. Career counseling in a postmodern era will rely more on autobiography and meaning making than on interest inventories and guidance techniques. Counselors will be more like co-authors and editors as they help clients to rewrite their pasts and plot their futures.

Conclusion

As we approach the turn of the millennium, career counseling seems to be reforming itself in an interpretive discipline in which practitioners aim to relate individuals to the society's division of labor. To learn more about career counseling as an interpretive discipline, counselors are encouraged to read the work of colleagues who write about fostering career development in the postmodern era: Carlson (1988) on career development as meaning making,

Cochran (1990, 1991, 1992) on the career project, Collin and Young (1986, 1988) on hermeneutical perspectives in career theory, Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie (1979) on life themes in career development, Jepsen (1992) on career as story, Neimeyer (1988) on constructivism and career choice, Peavy (1992) on constructivist career counseling, Ochberg (1988) on narrative construction of career, Osherson (1980) on the private meaning of career choices, Savickas (1988, 1989, 1990) on career-style counseling, Young (1988) on meaning making in career development, and Young and Borgen (1990) on studying subjective careers.

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Table 1

From Modern to PostmodernMODERN

Positivism
 industrial age
 printing press
 Newtonian physics
 demand singular truth
 principles
 empiricism
 objectivity
 reason
 procedural rationality
 concepts
 language reflects reality
 definitions describe
 discover meaning
 goal = accurate
 clients receive pre-defined
 services

POSTMODERN

Postmodernism
 information age
 electronic media
 Quantum physics
 appreciate multiple realities
 particulars
 interpretivism
 perspectivity
 relationships
 interpretive community
 constructs
 language produces reality
 definitions inscribe
 invent meaning
 goal = useful, interesting
 clients agentic in
 interpreting and shaping their
 own lives