

Career Indecision as a Meaning-Making Process

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During the last decade, much attention has been paid to developing models for vocational development that address the subjective experience of career. Most of this work deals with theoretical constructs for understanding career actions from the stance of perspectival social constructivism. However, the scholarship on vocational development as self-construction has not yet seriously addressed the topic of career intervention. Thus, the present symposium seeks to turn this discourse from theory to practice by considering career intervention to be a meaning making endeavor. The symposium focuses on counseling for career indecision from three different approaches: constructivism (Neimeyer, 1992), the narrative paradigm (Cochran, 1991), and autobiography (Super, 1954). In this paper, I apply Super's (1954) thematic-extrapolation method for making meaning of vocational biographies to counseling for career indecision. Before describing how thematic-extrapolation can be used in constructivist counseling for career indecision, I briefly trace the history of counseling for career indecision.

Indecision as an Objective Phenomenon

Parsons (19909) scientized vocational guidance by making it an objective enterprise, thus legitimatizing it for the twentieth century. Accordingly, counselors have studied and treated indecision by abstracting and objectifying it. 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, p. 19) advised counselors to classify clients into two main classes.

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.

Counselors followed this advice in 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 epidemiology of indecision by repeatedly inquiring about the percent of college students who are undecided? Implicit in this survey research was the assumption that indecision reflected a personality problem or defect. Eventually this assumption prompted numerous studies that looked for 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 less accomplished and mature, although Slaney (1988) argued convincingly that this conclusion is empirically untenable.

The view that indecision reflects immaturity, or worse, 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, lack of self-knowledge, and so on. Crites (1969, chapter 7) published a comprehensive review of these diagnostic schemes.

Indecision as a Unidimensional Continuum. In the mid 1970s, many researchers began to view indecision as a unidimensional continuum between decided and undecided, not a simple dichotomy. Holland and Osipow helped to popularize the process view of decidedness by providing counselors with scales to survey progress in resolving their career indecision. The Vocational Decision-Making Difficulties Scale (Holland, Gottfredson, & Nafziger, 1973) and the Career Decision Scale (Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico, & Koschier, 1976) measure a person's career choice status and identify difficulties that thwart career choice closure. These first-generation indecision scales were intended to locate the client's position on a unidimensional continuum from undecided to decided.

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. 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 (Vondracek, Hostetler, Schulenberg, & Shimizu, 1990; Savickas & Jarjoura, 1991). Other researchers are producing second-generation scales expressly designed to measure multiple dimensions of indecision and to identify subgroups: My Vocational Situation (Holland, Daiger, & Powers,

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. However, the studies of indecision and the measures of it 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 has objectified and decontextualized it. Indecision is operationally defined by client responses to lists of decision-making difficulties that have been abstracted and decontextualized. The constructivist perspective offers another view of indecision, and maybe one that lends itself to prompting innovations in the treatment of career indecision. 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 scores to subjective stories.

Indecision as a Subjective Experience

From the constructivist perspective, career indecision is not operationally defined 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. The indecision expresses hesitation before transformation. The person purposively pauses in their line of movement. However, this pause or hesitation does not stall or stop movement (which would be diagnosed as depression). The movement, rather than advancing, swings back-and-forth and side-to-side movement. Wavering, to use Cochran's (1991) elegant term and succinct definition of indecision, is movement toward meaning not toward 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 telling stories about it.

I 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 their line of movement. A

client's indecision becomes an opportunity for meaning making when the counselor focuses attention on how that career indecision fits within the pattern of larger meanings being lived by the client. There are no isolated choices; all 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 which she or he now faces. Counselors then use this narrative to 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 clients' ability to decide and eases their forward movement into new constructions of experience.

Counseling for Career Indecision

My approach to life-theme counseling for career indecision involves five steps. First, I collect stories that reveal the life theme. Second, I narrate the theme to the client. Third, the client and I discuss the meaning of the current indecision by relating it to the life theme. Fourth, we extend the theme into the future by naming interests and occupations that address the preoccupation and project that define the life theme. Finally, we rehearse the behavioral skills needed to specify and implement a career choice. This section describes the typical process of using these five steps with a client. The following section reports a case study that illustrates the five steps.

After meeting a client who seeks to resolve her or his career indecision, I learn the details of the current indecision and quickly proceed

to elicit stories that reveal the client's life theme. A life theme is like a plot in literature. Plots compose the structure of relationships by which events are endowed with meaning as parts of an integrated whole. Life stories deal with the dialectic interaction between the linear incidents that make the plot (i.e., plan of action) and the timeless, motionless, underlying themes that make the life. Accordingly, I seek two types of stories: those that reveal the client's preoccupation and those that reveal the plot. I then connect these stories with the thread of continuity that is the life theme.

In deciding which types of stories to elicit from undecided clients, I 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). So I start at the beginning of clients' lives by asking for stories about the families that raised them. In listening to these stories, I am especially alert for the trouble, imbalance, or deviation that these stories accentuate. In effect, I am listening for the preoccupation or the thematic problem around which the client organizes her or his life.

Having elicited stories about the preoccupation, I seek stories about the clients' projects in life, or what they plot doing about their preoccupation. To identify the project, I want 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, I 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 themselves to better address the preoccupation. The type of stories that are most useful to me in seeing the life project are

stories about their heroines and heros because these role models delineate cultural scripts for problem solving that clients have intentionally adopted. The identity narratives give me the goal of the story and explain how clients seek completion through closing the gap between what they have experienced and what they wanted. These identity stories explain how clients attempt to move from a felt minus to a subjectively-defined plus. More specifically, the identity stories tell me 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, I 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, we are ready to collaborate in using the theme to understand and resolve the career indecision. This requires that we address directly the current indecision which they are using to hesitate before stepping into the future. The following prompting questions help clients to them 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, diagnosed, or labeled?

*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 before.

*Do you have any idea of what haunts you?

*Tell me that part of your life story that 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, or me. Now is the time for them to draw on their courage to say what they think about their project as a human being. I offer the encouragement they need to authorize their story; to give voice to their ambition, that which they hesitate to state.

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

Case Study

A case example may illustrate how I foster career development by helping clients to articulate a life theme that makes explicit the pattern of their unfolding lives, pictures clear and stable identities, and gives voice to their identity and ambitions for the future. I will discuss fragments of the case of a female college sophomore whose mother arranged for her to receive counseling for her career indecision. The fragments illustrate how I use stories that reveal preoccupations and projects to clarify a life theme and then relate it to the client in a manner designed to resolve career indecision. The fragments that I report deal with (1) family stories that reveal her preoccupation, (2) identity stories that show how she plots her

life project, and (3) statements that locate the current indecision squarely within her life theme.

1. 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 or

Dog Plan Fails

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 alright.

2. 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. The story was about a showdown against creatures trying to take over some kids' minds. She thought up ways to stick together and fight them.

Ann of Green Gables because Ann 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.

She also like The Search of Mary Kay Malloy who went from Ireland to America by herself.

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

3. 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 pre-med. He said that when he was in college he was not sure so he left college and joined the Navy 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 he 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.

Her indecision seemed to be hesitation about completing the major that her mother selected for her. She knew that she wanted to major in mathematics or chemistry but did not know how speak out about it to her mother. Instead

of discussing it with mother, she became undecided and depressed. When her mother noticed the depression, she decided to enlist a counselor in convincing her daughter to become a physician.

Counseling consisted of narrating her life theme to her, relating the 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 different major. Counseling concluded with efforts to enhance her sense of personal agency, encouragement to speak openly with her mother, and assertiveness training.

Follow-up six months and two years later found her progressing well in her self-chosen major in mathematics, relating to her mother extremely well, and making plans to move out-of-state to pursue a graduate degree in computer systems.

Conclusion

Inscribing indecision as an attempt at making meaning during a transformation permits us to conceptualize 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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