

Interests: From Tension to Intention

Mark L. Savickas

Behavioral Sciences Department

Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine

Rootstown, Oh 44272-0095

Presented in the symposium Interests in Careers: A
Fresh Approach to Knowing and Showing, D. Jepsen
(Chair), conducted at the Annual Convention of the
American Counseling Association, Minneapolis, MN,
April, 1994.

Abstract

Interests are the bridge by which individuals reach out to the environment as they move to become more whole, more complete. Individuals traverse their self-constructed bridges to reach solutions to problems in growing up. In crossing the bridge, they gather from the real world those materials and resources that they use to develop themselves and conduct their life projects. Counselors can assess how clients' form and use their interests as solutions by finding the theme that connects stories which clients tell about themselves to the role models which they admire. Creating a narrative that explains a client's interests as tensions turned into intentions can clarify the client's occupational choices and enhance her or his ability to make career decisions.

Interests: From Tension to Intention

From the objective perspective taken by modern science, interests are patterns of likes, dislikes, and indifferent responses to environmental stimuli. Psychological theory has given counselors at least three ways to understand a client's interests: as enduring traits, as learned behaviors, and as motivators (Darley & Hagenah, 1955). These objective and scientific conceptions of interests have been useful to theorists and researchers in constructing explanations of careers and to counselors in interpreting the results of interest inventories. Unfortunately, the objectification of interests may not be as useful to the client who is trying to understand how interests shape his or her career. The present paper explains one way in which the subjective view of interests, in contrast to the objective view, presents counselors with another way to understand a client's interests and, thus, help the client to use her or his interests in positively constructing a career.

Interests Defined

As noted by Anygal (1941, p. 126), interests are "symbolic elaborations of biospheric tensional

states." Anygal's conception of interests as tensional relationships between an individual and the environment coincides well with the etymon of the word "interest." In Latin, the word inter means between and the word esse means to be. The Middle English and Medieval Latin interesse was modified by Old French into inter est, est being the third person singular of esse and meaning "it is." Thus interest, or it is between, became the word to denote things that concern or are to the advantage of the individual. For our purposes herein, interest denotes a relationship between the individual and the environment, one 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 Anygal (1941) pointed out, to lack interest means to turn away from the world as seen in the posture of the depressed client and schizophrenic patient. Interests, as a mediational interface between the person and the environment, are guides analogous to longitude and latitude on the globe. Interests situate the individual in his or her world and provide a unifying orientation for an individual's movement in that world.

Origins of Interests

Implicit within the above stated definition of interests is a view concerning how interests originate. If interests truly bridge the individual and the context, we must ask where in the river of life do individuals construct their bridges? I believe Adler (1956) provided a workable answer to this question. The line of movement in an individual life proceeds from a felt negative to a perceived plus. Accordingly, individuals construct their bridges at the base of their perceived problems and seek to span toward self-fulfilling solutions. Thus, interests are the bridge by which individuals reach out to the environment as they move to become more whole, more complete. Individuals traverse their self-constructed bridges to reach solutions to problems in growing up. In crossing the bridge, they gather from the real world those materials and resources that they use to develop themselves and conduct their life projects.

This view of how interests originate is not new. It springs in part from Carter's (1940, p. 186) conclusion that interests represent an individual's attempts at "a practical adjustment to environmental conditions." I view interests as

"solutions to their problems of adjustment" (Carter, 1940, p. 187). In this sense, an individual's interests reflect a search for the potential benefit in every problem. Interests strive to maintain an individual's integrity by charting strategies for survival and adaptability. Interests cultivate a solution to problems in growing up. Moreover, interests propose a developmental path, a bridge that leads to opportunities for integrative adaptation, maximal development, and self-fulfillment.

Content of Interests

Given that interests arise as a proposed solution to problems in growing up, the content of an individual's interests relate directly to the problems that the individual encounters in struggling to develop. However, unlike psychodynamic theorists, I do not believe that the actual content of interests is shaped by the problem. Admittedly, an individual's problems reveal a part of the life pattern or theme. In fact, the problem which an individual wishes to resolve above all others shows the core of the theme, the individual's chief preoccupation (Csizentmihaly and Beattie, 1979). However, interests are shaped by the solutions. For

example, knowing that the overarching tension in a client's life is the desire to become independent 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 elaborated in the wider social environment. Where do answers/interests come from? I believe that the simple response to this question is that role models present potential solutions to the individual who is in a struggle to flourish. Role models may be viewed as standard stories told by a culture to portray paths to self-fulfillment offered within that society. These stories, which portray developmental pathways, are crystallized and symbolized in the shorthand of role models. The dramatic actions of the heroine or hero portray specific interests and attitudes as a means of actively mastering what was at first passively suffered.

Interest Assessment from the Subjective Perspective

To assess the subjective meaning of interests, counselors need to understand the direction of the client's life, in narrative form, as a quest for meaning and livability. Traditionally, counselors assess a client's interests with an objective

interest inventory. From the subjective perspective, counselors discern a client's interests from stories provided by the clients. In these stories the client digest experiences, makes meaning, and stores maps.

Early stories reveal the problem or stress very clearly (McKelvie, 1979; Watkins, 1984). To elicit such stories, a counselor need merely ask a client to share a few stories about the earliest incidents in the client's life. From these stories a counselor can discern the life theme by identifying recurrent patterns, crucial attitudes, private meanings, and guiding beliefs that structure the client's private parables concerning the "story of life."

After identifying the preoccupation or main problem, the counselor can turn attention to learning the client's role models. Models are escape from destiny by way of choice. Role models present potential solutions. This notion is beautifully stated by Wayne Cobb from North Carolina who said that "My idea of a hero is someone who is to be cherished not so much for what they have accomplished in their own lives, but for what they have accomplished in mine, for how they have inspired me

to grow and change and to become more of what I was created to be." 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 individuals' 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 heros 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 (from the objective perspective, their RIASEC code). The word "style" comes from the Latin word "stylus" meaning a writing instrument. With a style, one writes their life story using the context and its opportunities as dramatic material.

The final step in assessing a client's inter-

ests from the subjective perspective is to understand how the problems revealed in the early stories are resolved by the interests represented by the role models. There are no isolated interests. All choices are embedded in pattern of living, in the unifying orientation revealed in interests. Interests reveal the past in the present. To help the client plan a career, the counselor looks for the ambition behind interests because this same ambitions fuels the career. In concluding the assessment, then, the counselor looks for the connections (life theme) among the early stories, role models, interests, and occupational daydreams by undertaking an investigation. The model for counselor as investigator is not Sherlock Holmes but Watson. The client is Holmes. In discussing the stories and models, the counselor continually asks the client questions such as "How do you see it?" "To what is connected?" "How do you put it together?" "How do you use it?" "What does it mean?" These questions clarify the subjective meaning of the client's interests and how that client proposes to use her or his interests in constructing an occupational career.

Career Counseling

After completing the assessment of interests, the counselor helps the client to see 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 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. In short, the narrative should provide the client with a framework for knowing interests as a life project.

The narration of interests as solutions should allow a client to understand the origins (beginning of the story) of interests as well as the meaning and significance (middle of the story), and do so in way that makes the future (continuation of the story) conceivable and attainable. To accomplish this, the narrative should clearly connect the client's interests with her or his life preoccupations in order to create greater reality and pattern of deeper meaning. Then the counselor should narrate how the client has turned problems into strengths. This part of the narration creates a unity for the client's life that can be extended into the future to clarify career choices by explaining how the strengths can become social contributions. Clarifying the client's life story enhances the client's ability to make career decisions.

Examples

The view of interests as solutions to problems in growing up is not esoteric. It is common sense, at least in the world of literature where novels

and biographies get their validity from the portraying clearly a life theme. As I was preparing this paper, I was reading a mystery novel by William Bayer (1987) entitled Pattern Crimes. The detective protagonist described his brother to his girlfriend.

Gideon was always the handsome one. Golden youth, golden man. He had beautiful features. Not like mine. Beside him I looked rough. People always said I had a good Israeli face, whatever that's supposed to mean. But Gideon had my mother's eyes and her beautiful fine carved lips. Artists friends of my parents were always asking to draw him. People who visited from overseas would take our picture together and then a separate one of him. As he grew older I began to notice that people stared at him, men and women both. He had that special kind of face people can't tear their eyes away from. But there was something wrong with him - I think I always knew there was. It was as if he was too perfect - perfect student, perfect son. And something bad was going on in the family. I still don't know what it was. Some kind of complicity between my parents - whispered conferences behind closed doors, my mother emerging with tears in her eyes, my father with his unhappy worried face. And then those quick silver alliances between the three of them.

He paused, trying to recapture an old feeling of separateness, of being part of his family and apart from it too. She was watching him, her eyes large, her compassion written on her face.

I think that's why you became a detective, she said. To figure out your family's mystery.

She was right and he loved her for

understanding him so well. Also for the quickness of her mind and the direct way that she spoke. (pp. 52-52)

Let me give you one case from my own work as a counselor. The student graduated from college as a pre-med, chemistry major and had hesitated applying for medical school in the year since he graduated. He sought counseling specifically to gather information about training programs and careers in psychology. His two stories and two role models follow.

I remember my mother would drop me off at nursery school before going to work. I had to take a nap in this room full of people. I did not like being forced to take a nap. One time I remember waking up and thinking it was interesting because I was sleeping but it was not my house. I wondered if my mother was going to show up.

I wore glasses in the first grade. One day my teacher called me up to the front of the room so that she could clean my glasses. I was very embarrassed.

My model was Superman because of his strength. He could fly. He could do whatever he wanted. He did not show his feelings but he did use humor. He let people express themselves. Another hero was a team of five people in a science fiction novel. It seemed neat to be on a team. My favorite character used goofy gadgets to foil the bad guys. He also had a plane.

From his stories, we learn that independence and individuality are important to him. In fact,

he stated several times during the inquiry phased that "I enjoy my individuality." Nevertheless, he enjoys being part of a team. His role on the team is to use gadgets to solve problems. In addition, we learn that, although he relishes displaying his individuality, he hides his private feelings. Also, he uses humor to cope with difficult situations. His view of school and teachers suggests a lack of comfort in the classroom. And his dirty glasses remind him constantly to remain clean and, if possible, fashionable.

On the occupational daydreams page of the Self-Directed Search he wrote: physician, nurse, optometrist, salesperson, and commercial airline pilot. His RIASEC code was ISE. His scores on the Jackson Vocational Interest Survey were very high for performing arts, social science, personal service, family activity, medical service, independence, and interpersonal confidence. JVIS scores were very low for academic achievement, elementary education, teaching, social service, technical writing, office work

In creating the narrative, I emphasized his project in life revolved around independence and self-expression of individuality yet this expres-

sion needed to be within a group or team of closely knit individuals who use science to solve problems. His role on the team was to provide morale through humor, remain rational and dispassionate, and use gadgets. I also pointed out his view that schools suppress individuality and teachers embarrass people. Good times with his close-knit group of friends helped him to remain in college until he graduated. The ensuing discussion quickly led him to conclude that the reason he hesitated to become a physician is that he did not want the independent, decision-making authority nor could he envision remaining in school for as many years as it took to become a physician. He wanted to be a part of a group that solved problems with science and affirmed the individual contributions of team members. Using the guiding narrative, he quickly decided to intensely explore three occupations (nurse anesthesiologist, optometrist, and pharmacist), one of which he eventually selected.

In closing, I share a quote from John Dos Passos that captures the essence of my view of interests:

"People don't choose their careers; they are engulfed by them."

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