

Life Planning for Self-Realization:  
Career Interests as Solutions

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Abstract

The constructivist view of occupational interests as indicators of subjective efforts to actively master what has been passively suffered augments the objective view of interests as patterns of likes and dislikes on interest inventories. Treating interests as solutions to problems in growing up explains the origin of interests, conceptually ties interests to self-realization, and provides a means whereby psychologists can enhance an individual's efforts toward self-realization.

### **Life Planning for Self-Realization:**

#### **Career Interests as Solutions**

Transforming career counseling into life planning recasts the goal of vocational psychology from helping clients identify viable occupations to fostering their self-realization. Prevailing views of vocational psychology concentrate on the match between a person and occupation. This view follows from the logical positivist philosophy of science that seeks objectivity in career guidance. Accordingly, vocational psychologists objectify people by measuring and profiling their interests and abilities. Psychologists then match these objective traits to occupational skills and reinforcers. Objectively matching person to position produces a fit that leads to job success.

Re-viewing career counseling from the vantage point of a constructivist philosophy of science moves the emphasis from objective to subjective fit. Life planning aids clients' in their quest for meaning by determining how they can use life roles to complete needs that were unmet during childhood and to work out a central life project. Life planning fosters self-realization by showing clients how to turn their personal preoccupations into social occupations. Essentially, life planning for self-realization expands the agenda of career counseling by showing clients how to use career interests as solutions to problems in growing up and adapting to adult life.

The present paper uses four sections to explain interests as a blueprint for self-realization. The paper begins with a reexamination of the **definition of interests** from constructivist and contextualist perspectives. The definition is followed by a discussion of the **origin of interests** as problems in a person's life and the **content of interests** as proposed solutions to these problems. The paper concludes with implications of these views for helping clients **plan for self-realization** as they design their lives.

#### **Definition of Interests**

Constructivism suggests that interests point to opportunities for self-realization. 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 inter means between and 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, meaning it is between, became the word to denote it interests, concerns, is to the advantage. So, 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 and the globe. Interests situate the individual in his or her world and provide a unifying orientation for an individual's movement in that world. Interests provide direction to a life and serve as a bridge between the individual's needs and their gratification in the real 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 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. 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.

From this viewpoint, interests arise from unfinished situations and incompletely formed gestalten. They symbolically portray how one intends to transcend limitations and overcome one's deficiencies. Occupational interests implicitly state how the individual plans to use work as way of making up for something that was missing in their childhood.

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.

An example may be useful at this point. When I was writing this paper, I read an article in The Cleveland Plain Dealer (May 23, 1994 issue). The article, entitled "Lifting Her Name Up High: Long Journey Ends at Sport's Hall of Fame" (written by Amy Rosewater) reported the story of a Cleveland woman who had recently been inducted into the United States Masters Weightlifting Hall of Fame, the first woman to achieve this recognition. She was quoted as saying "I expected to do something like this. That's what I wanted. The Hall of Fame." She had spent the first nine years of her life on crutches because she was born with a defect in her left knee. When she was 19 years old, her father on his deathbed told her, his only child, that he wished she had been a boy because a boy could carry on his name. Since that moment, she was determined not to let her name die. While she was working in a laundromat, she met a prominent weightlifter who ran a gymnasium. She entered weight training with the goal of becoming a champion. Today, the 110 pounder can use her hips and legs to lift 910 pounds. She did all this because if she got her name in a Hall of Fame, it would never die. "I wanted to try something to keep my name forever."

#### Content of Interests

Given that interests arise as a proposed solution to problems in growing up, the content of an individual's interests related directly to the problems that the individual encounters in struggling to develop. However, unlike earlier psychodynamic theorists, I do not conclude that individual problems shape the actual content of interests. In fact, interests are shaped by the solutions. Admittedly, the problems reveal a part of the life pattern of theme (Csizentmihaly and Beattie, 1979; Adler, 1956). In fact, the problem which they wish to resolve above all others shows the core of the theme, the individual's chief pre-occupation. For example, knowing that the overarching tension in a client's life is not to let her name die 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 carried to and elaborated in the wider social environment. Where do answers come from? I believe that the simple answer to this question is that role models present potential solutions to an individual's struggle to flourish. Role models portray paths to self-realization offered within that society. The actions of the heroine or hero portray specific interests and

attitudes as a means of actively mastering what was first at first passively suffered. In the case of the female weightlifter, the tension was to keep her name alive whereas the intention, modeled by a prominent male weightlifter, was to become a champion weightlifter. In short, tension is to theme as intention is to interests.

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 (or objective RIASEC code).

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.

Active mastery of problems through interests was referred to by Freud as the ego paradigm in which one turns suffering to strength and possibly even a social contribution. Milton, in Paradise Lost had Lucifer on his arrival in hell turn to his followers and announced "Our torments shall become our element." Every individual makes her or his torments their element. In moving from victim to victor, the individual turns a tension into an intention. Freud called this pre-occupation with mastery the repetition compulsion and furthermore, viewed repetition with mastery as growth and repetition without mastery as neurosis. In today's language we talk about effort attributions, self-efficacy, agency, internal locus of control rather than mastery but the meanings are fundamentally similar in that the individual reaches self-realization by converting a symptom into a strength. Interests show the developmental pathway to self-realization.

#### **Interests Plan for Self-Realization: Counseling Implications**

Viewing interests as a pathways to self-realization allows a counselor to help the client to view 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 as paths to self-realization. In short, the narrative should provide the client with a framework for knowing interests as a life project and a means of self-realization.

#### **Conclusion**

The constructivist view of occupational interests as indicators of subjective efforts to actively master what has been passively suffered augments the objective view of interests as patterns of likes and dislikes on interest inventories. Treating interests are solutions to problems in growing up conceptually ties interests to self-realization as well as provides a means whereby counselors can enhance an individual's efforts toward self-realization.

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