

From Objectivity to Perspectivity in Career Counseling

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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.

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As we meet today, we are living in late modern times. Our society is about to enter the postmodern era, probably using the turn of the millennium to identify the formal birth of the postmodern era. With luck, most of us in this room will still be counselors in the year 2,000. Those of us that remain in the profession will be counseling clients who live in a different kind of world.

We see the gestation of the new world all about us. Across the country, newspapers report stories about companies offering day-care and parental leave; increasing numbers of families requiring dual earners; how more and more people are working at home. In addition the strong intertwining of work and family roles, work itself involves evermore symbolic problem-solving. All workers are being expected to become better communicators. Middle class workers, especially are being challenged to work effectively with symbols or be left behind. We seem to be moving toward a two class society that pits those comfortable working with symbols against and those who can only labor with their hands. The workers will compete in a global economy, driven by research, development, and innovation.

To adapt to the postmodern era, our culture is revising itself by changing the meaning of knowledge, science, authority, and diversity. As the culture changes its patterns and stories, individuals in the culture must adopt new views. To better serve

clients who will view the world differently than our generation, career counselors are starting to transform their outlook and skill repertoire. era. The essence of this transformation in counseling theory and technique may be implicit in the switch from objectivity to perspectivity – the topic of this paper.

#### **The Subjectivity of the Romantic Era**

This move to a new world is not unexpected. USA does it regularly with the turn of a century. 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. From this view, concepts arise from private encounters with examples of natural states. 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.

#### The Objectivity of the Modern Era

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 God's calling 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. Twentieth century science replaced Romantic

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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.

#### The Confusion of Late Modern Times

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, 1988). 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 Into Postmodern Times**

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 the uniformity of 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.

#### **The Perspectivity of Postmodern Times**

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 the professed unsituated stance of objectivity and the normatively imposed stance of uniformity to the stance of perspectivity that alleges we each have a different standpoint from which to view the known.

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#### What Perspectivity Is Not

In closing, I want to address three attacks on perspectivity that I anticipate you might make. First, perspectivity is not an integration of objectivity and subjectivity. Perspectivity counters the myth of objectivity (i.e., value free science) by explaining that the social construction of knowledge affects what counts as science. It also counters the myth of subjectivity (i.e., meaning is personal) by showing us that all meaning is relational. However, perspectivity does not say the answer lies in combining objectivity and subjectivity as some would have it. The postmodern turn is "not both but neither." Postmodern scholars use doubt and uncertainty to challenge abstract principles and to make commonsense problematic. As Lather (1991) explained, the postmodern turn makes unities (objectivity) into multiplicities, clarities (subjectivity) into ambiguities, and univocal simplicities (uniformity) into polyvocal complexities.

Second, perspectivity is not a replacement for objectivity. Rather, it seeks to reveal the pretense of value-free objectivity. Harding (1991) referred to this stance as weak objectivity. Research, recognized as socially situated, can be made more objective although it cannot be made value free. We need this strong objectivity to rationally distinguish more partial and less distorted truth. The rigors of empirical knowledge seeking lead to

maximal objectivity. Perspectivity does not encounter objectivity with "just say no." Rather, perspectivity seeks to describe objectivity's shameful history of serving the elite and to make sure that might does not make right in knowledge seeking.

Third, perspectivity is not radical relativism. Perspectivity does not mean that everyone's standpoint produce knowledge of equal usefulness. Rather it subscribes to the notion that a "community of knowers" makes commitments to what is valid for that community. Meaning is between people so knowledge is relational not private.

#### Conclusion

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 (Savickas, In press).

This transformation finds counselors engaged in developing new models and methods for enabling clients to explore the personal meaning of career. One approach to enablement uses the narrative model from literature and literary criticism. Working with the

narrative paradigm, counselors are designing new methods to nourish expressive freedom so that clients act as agents in framing their lives, or metaphorically, writing their career stories. Briefly stated this transformation from propositional logic to the narrative paradigm seems to be moving from fit to enable, from congruence to belongingness, from similarity to uniqueness, from possession to use, and from choice to decision making. Now, I am pleased to introduce David Jepsen who will discuss the transformation in counseling models and methods for fostering career development in the 21st century.

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TABLE 1: FROM MODERN TO POSTMODERN

<u>MODERN</u>	<u>POSTMODERN</u>
<b>printing press</b>	<b>electronic media</b>
<b>industrial age</b>	<b>information age</b>
<b>Newtonian physics</b>	<b>Quantum physics</b>
<b>positivism</b>	<b>post-positivism</b>
<b>empiricism</b>	<b>interpretivism</b>
<b>concepts</b>	<b>constructs</b>
<b>definitions describe</b>	<b>definitions inscribe</b>
<b>discover meaning</b>	<b>invent meaning</b>
<b>principles</b>	<b>particulars</b>
<b>objectivity</b>	<b>perspectivity</b>
<b>reason</b>	<b>relationships</b>
<b>singular truth</b>	<b>multiple realities</b>
<b>procedural rationality</b>	<b>interpretive community</b>
<b>language reflects reality</b>	<b>language produces reality</b>
<b>goal = accurate</b>	<b>goal = useful &amp; interesting</b>

HANDOUT 1: WORK ROLE ETHICS ACROSS THREE CENTURIES

19TH CENTURY	20TH CENTURY	21ST CENTURY
VOCATIONAL ETHIC -----	CAREER ETHIC -----	DEVELOPMENT ETHIC -----
SELF-EMPLOYED FARMERS AND CRAFTSPEOPLE	EMPLOYED BY ORGANIZATIONS	WORK IN TEAMS
ROMANTIC CONCEPTUALISM	LOGICAL POSITIVISM	POSTMODERN INTERPRETIVISM
MEANING IN THE PERSON	MEANING IN THE WORLD	MEANING IN THE WORD
VALUE FEELINGS	VALUE FACTS	VALUE PERSPECTIVE
BE CREATIVE	BE RATIONAL	BE IN COMMUNITY
SUCCESS THROUGH SELF-EXPRESSION AND INDIVIDUAL EFFORT	SUCCESS THROUGH CLIMBING SOMEBODY ELSE'S LADDER	SUCCESS THROUGH COOPERATION AND CONTRIBUTION