

Schema and Thema in Social Cognitive Career Counseling

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Prepared for presentation in Karen M. O'Brien and Mary J. Heppner
(Chairs), Innovative Applications of Social Cognitive Theory to
Career Counseling. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the
American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, August, 1994.

Abstract

Career cognitions of clients are central to educational-vocational counseling. How clients' represent self, other people, and events is critical in their quest to make sense of their vocational past and to anticipate their future career. In working with client career cognitions, counselors can emphasize a client's paradigmatic reasoning or narrative storytelling.

The first perspective on client career cognitions emphasizes the paradigmatic structure and schema that shape thought. Social-cognitive therapists direct their interventions to revise schematic elements such as agency, complexity, coherence, causality, and temporal orientation. The second perspective on client career cognition emphasizes the narrative content and thema manifest in the cognitions. Constructivist therapists concentrate on life plots and projects that give meaning to a collection of career stories. They direct their therapeutic interventions to revise the thematic elements into more adaptive stories.

To date, the group of scholars who are developing the social learning and the social cognitive career theories have emphasized paradigmatic schema. In applying their insights to career counseling, attention must be balanced between schema and narrative thema. In particular, efforts to promote self-efficacy, improve career beliefs, and change other career cognitions will be more effective if they attend to both schema and thema.

Schema and Thema in Social Cognitive Career Counseling

Some of the most important recent advances in understanding vocational behavior and career development have been offered by a group of scholars associated with the social learning and social cognitive models for comprehending human behavior. As a group, these scholars emphasize the role of "self-referent thinking" in career motivation and in educational-vocational performance. Their contributions to career theory have now reached the threshold point at which intense work must be done to apply these theoretical advances to the practice of career intervention. Accordingly, Krumboltz (1994) recently initiated efforts to construct a "learning theory of career counseling" that translates his social learning theory of vocational behavior into counseling practice.

Although quite interesting and important, a learning theory of career counseling is only one of the possibilities for applying recent advances in social learning and social cognitive models of vocational behavior. This is because the learning theory of career counseling relies on one mode of human cognition, namely what Bruner (1986) calls the paradigmatic mode. The other mode of human cognitive functioning Bruner calls the narrative mode. The difference between the two modes of thought is essentially the difference between logical reasoning and scripting a story. Paradigmatic thought emphasizes schema and mental sets. Schema, from the Greek, means "a form or plan." Applied to career

cognitions, I take schema to mean how one organizes the world and makes meaning. Narrative thought emphasizes stories and thema. Thema, also from the Greek, means "what is laid down." Applied to career narratives, I take thema to mean what occurs in the biography or story of development. The difference between career cognitions that emphasize paradigmatic schema and those that emphasize narrative thema may be instructive in applying social learning and social cognitive models to career intervention.

The propositional logic of the paradigmatic mode of thought has proven valuable in social learning and social cognitive career counseling. Nevertheless, in exploring "self-referent thinking" the narrative mode may also offer potentially useful counseling methods for improving career beliefs and enhancing self-efficacy. In particular, the narrative mode of thought (Savickas, 1992) may offer a second, and fundamentally distinct, means of translating into counseling practice the theoretical advances offered by social learning and social cognitive theories of vocational behavior. In the present paper, I examine the possibility of using the narrative mode of cognition to apply social learning and social cognitive career theories to counseling for increased self-efficacy. First the paper discusses social cognitive career counseling from the paradigmatic mode, then from the narrative mode, and concludes by comparing and contrasting schema and thema as they apply to social cognitive career counseling.

Paradigmatic Career Cognition

The first perspective on client career cognition

concentrates on the paradigmatic reasoning. From this vantage point, counselors may seek to identify the intellectual categories and mental sets that a client uses to make sense of experience. Social learning and social cognitive theorists, regardless of whether they advocate a rationalist or constructivist position, emphasize paradigmatic schema in their conceptualizations of and investigations about the influence of career cognitions on vocational behavior.

Recent advances from the two schools have focused on faulty thinking, decisional processes, and reasoning. Examples of these contributions include (a) Krumboltz's (1988) investigation of career beliefs; (b) Lent, Brown and Hackett's (in press) model of career self-efficacy; (c) Nevo's (1987) application of Rational-Emotive Therapy to career counseling; (d) Sampson, Peterson, Reardon, and Lentz's (1994) work on career conceptions; (e) Lewis and Gilhousen's (1981) cognitive approach to career counseling; Dorn's discussion of career myths; and (g) Dolliver and Nelson's (1975) and Thompson's (1976) identification of mistaken ideas about career development.

In my opinion, these contributions emphasize propositional logic because they address how the story is formed as well as abstract principles for making meaning. Rather than deal with the content of the client's vocational stories, these contributions deal with the structure that generates the stories and the generalizability of that structure in the client's cognitive patterns for converting experience into meaning, values,

interests, and future behavior. Accordingly, recent social learning and social cognitive contributions advance the long tradition of logical positivism in relating first-order self processes to vocational behavior. Counseling Applications

Applying the theoretical contribution of the social learning and social cognitive models to career counseling seems straightforward from the paradigmatic perspective: change a client's self-schema to produce changes in that client's construction of meaning and subsequent vocational behavior. The counselor's goal is to help the client identify, understand, and modify the principle behind the event. Certainly, the counseling methods that have been developed and those currently under construction to change career beliefs and enhance self-efficacy have been successful in fostering clients' career development. Teaching decisional skills, examining reasoning errors, confronting misconceptions, discussing career beliefs, enhancing self-esteem, and encouraging self-efficacy are each valuable tools in a counselor's armamentarium. Nevertheless, without ignoring the important advances offered by focusing on the paradigmatic mode of client career cognition, there is a second perspective that social learning and social cognitive counselors may take on client career cognition, namely the vantage point provided by listening to the narrative mode of thought.

Narrative Career Cognitions

Using the narrative mode of cognitive functioning, people make stories out of events. Through stories, individuals make

meaning of their experiences. They use stories to digest the experience, explain discrepancies from the norm, and store that meaning. In the end, the stories construct the identity of the teller. Learning and cognition are the processes that people use to construct stories and create meaning.

The narrative perspective on client career cognitions has traditionally emphasized the thema of vocational stories. Thematic content may be considered the second-order self, in that they are content rather than process. Thema, as a second-order self, are text about how one is situated with respect to others and the world (Bruner, 1986, p. 130). A second-order self is the self that an individual scripts as a character in her or his own vocational stories. That self-chosen identity unfolds in the linear instances that compose the plot and life projects manifest in vocational stories. From the vantage point of thematic analysis, counselors may seek to identify the thema that are revealed in a set of vocational stories to articulate the groundings of vocational identity.

Counseling Applications

From the vantage point of narrative thema, a counselor directs interventions to revise the thematic elements from a set of vocational stories into a new, more adaptive superordinate story. Narrative retelling allows personal transformation in the client. Counselors can foster this transformation by focusing attention on key experiences that clarify the emerging drama. Counselors then help clients to reconsider these key experience in

light of new information. Clients can then change themselves by revising their stories to be more coherent, continuous, clear, and credible. Clients can write new plots, script new destinies, and improve their coping repertoire by changing their expectations and thus their behavior.

In general, techniques for helping clients to clarify and improve their stories, and thereby careers, include extracting vocational stories, identifying themes and tension, constructing a healthier life story, and designing the personal future. In particular career counselors wishing to work with thema in clients' career narratives may:

- *elicit stories about formative experiences, adventures, school, struggles, and predictions about the future
- *examine story elements including the hero/heroine, friends, enemies, acts, tools, purposes, scenes
- *plot events of the client's life and identify themes and tensions
- *spot strategic spots at which ambiguities arise
- *analyze themes as suggested by Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie (1979) to determine if themes are discovered or accepted, abstract or concrete, personal or general, clear or ambiguous, essential or external
- *discuss themes as adaptive systems for coping
- *edit healthier stories that correct mistakes, settle accounts, and come to terms with parents, siblings, and friends

*invite retelling of stories

*plot, design, script future by writing a future
autobiography

Integrating Schema and Thema in Social Cognitive Career Counseling

Schema in career cognitions involve principles concerning the behavior of human beings whereas thema involve the storyline in the lives of humans being. Schema are compared to those of some normative reference group and thema are treated as particular knowledge about a client's unique biography. Schema are the first-order self-processes used in constructing the second-order self-thema. Schema and consciousness, as for example in the case of self-efficacy and other career beliefs, are usually investigated across individuals using the paradigmatic mode of thought and the scientific method of logical positivism. Thema and self-consciousness are second-order phenomenon and are usually investigated using the narrative mode of thought and the case study methods of constructivism.

The two perspectives of schema and thema can be used to consider recent contributions from social learning and social cognitive models. For example, consider Bandura's (1989, p. 391) definition of self-efficacy as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance." The perspective of paradigmatic schema focuses on the phrase "people's judgment of their capabilities" whereas the perspective of narrative thema

focuses on the "courses of action." Both are important and using both perspectives deepens the counselor's understanding of a client.

To date, counseling uses of self-efficacy theory (Betz, 1992) focus on changing paradigmatic schema in client career cognitions through interventions that increase expectations of efficacy. The four sources of efficacy information most commonly addressed in career intervention are performance accomplishments (e.g., success experiences), vicarious learning (e.g., pertinent role models), emotional arousal (e.g., anxiety management), and verbal persuasion (e.g., encouragement).

These same four sources of efficacy information could be addressed in working with thema in career narratives as well. A vocational story can easily be analyzed for successful performances, inspirational role models (hero/heroine), strong feelings, and sources of persuasion. Accordingly, counselors who wish to enhance self-efficacy through clients' career narratives can focus on the four sources of efficacy information as they appear in vocational stories. In working with career narratives to enhance self-efficacy counselors may wish to try the following activities.

Performance accomplishments:

- *emphasize internal resources and intrinsic motivation
- *highlight personal strengths and acknowledge successes
- *articulate interests and values expressed in the action
- *point out goal setting and planning

- *reinforce coping with external forces and goal thwarting
- *elicit new stories that reveal previously neglected aspects of lived experience
- *help clients perform their stories better

Vicarious learning:

- *identify story parts that display expectations or specifications of significant others
- *discuss what is being learned and what is being done effectively
- *generate a multiple perspective
- *look for stories outside the dominant theme (i.e., self as model)
- *heighten awareness of gender imperatives in narratives
- *highlight unique accomplishments
- *relate stories to vignettes about potential role models
- *identify adaptive behaviors of others in the story
- *articulate implicit problem-solving strategies

Emotional Arousal:

- *repeat vivid metaphors and sensory images
- *emphasize dramatic language in story
- *discuss positive and negative feeling words
- *create image of life course that enhances self-esteem
- *counter negative self-judgments

Verbal persuasion:

- *focus attention on doing something not being something
- *emphasize what client is doing not how client is doing

- *emphasize what client is doing not how client is doing
- *attend more to the deed than the doer
- *reinforce effort rather than judge outcome
- *encourage "I" statements in narratives
- *help clients become self-conscious of their role as meaning makers when they form and tell stories
- *script alternative stories that empower new action

These narrative mode for assessing and modifying self-efficacy and other career beliefs can complement the more traditional paradigmatic mode of working directly with schema in client career cognitions. Of course, practice-oriented research projects must be conducted to test the validity for use of these suggestions.

Conclusion

Counseling is a social context for making a client's self intelligible to that client and for modifying the client's thinking or revising the client's narratives. Paradigmatic schema and narrative thema both create interpretive frameworks for developing a career. Therefore, both how (schema) a client knows and what (thema) a client knows should be subject to career intervention. Modifying the particulars of vocational stories and career thema is more likely to develop a career when used in conjunction with techniques for modifying the abstract, propositional logic in paradigmatic schema manifested in career beliefs and self-efficacy judgments.

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