

Interview

Jon Carlson : hi, I'm Jon Carlson. I'd like to welcome you to the APA Psychotherapy series. This series is on specific treatments for specific populations, and this program is on career counseling. Our guest is Doctor Mark Savickas. Mark, welcome, since this is a program on specific treatments, can you talk about just what career counselling is?

Mark Savickas : Career counselling is a psychological intervention intended to help people plan their work lives and secure meaningful employment, to choose occupations and work assignments that allow them to be the person they want to be... so it differs from psychotherapy in that there's a strong connection to society and bridging the gap between person and community

Jon Carlson : So, just, how does this work though? How do you do career counselling?

Mark Savickas : Traditionally we always focus ..on three steps. The first step is self-analysis ... help the people know themselves better, their strengths, their weaknesses, who they are ...so we always start there ..and then we try and relate that to possibilities, possible choices, possible selves that they can become in the world of work, and that can involve occupation, information or me just talking about the world of work. And then the third and final step is that old idea of matching, of .. where do I fit, among the possibilities, which one...which one seems to me to be a good match for me now.

Jon Carlson : Is there some root, theoretical root to your approach?

Mark Savickas : Well, the grand paradigm of these three steps is the old matching model Frank Parsons that the field of counselling, applied psychology started with, but then.... my theoretical application of that for the self analysis, for knowing oneself, I like to apply narrative psychology, learning psychology. Daniel Super in 1954 wrote a beautiful paper about career patterns and identifying patterns by thematic analysis.

Jon Carlson : So you use some Super's ideas to blend with Adler and narrative approach

Mark Savickas : I would say I use Super's rational and Adler's method but today we call it narrative.

Jon Carlson : So, how did you, you know, get into this work. What is your personal story?

Mark Savickas : I was working towards becoming a school psychologist and interested very much in development, human development, and, as I was waiting to do my internship in the School of Psychology I had a semester to wait, and ... somebody quit a position in the College Counseling Center and I was invited to take that position. And I appeared for work one Monday morning and a student walked behind me. The director said: this is your first client and that is your office. Naturally the student asked for career counselling and I was quite puzzled and perplexed because I knew how to give Stanford-Binet.

Jon Carlson : So, it sounds like it was luck.

Mark Savickas : Serendipity or preparation meeting opportunity, but it was unplanned, but once it happened I knew it was for me.

Jon Carlson : I see. So if this wasn't for you, this work, would you have done it, or would you have moved on to something else, maybe back to Stanford-Binet..

Mark Savickas : I would have done the internship in the School of Psychology, but I enjoyed it tremendously so my work became helping other people find their work.

Jon Carlson : So, how does change take place in your model?

Mark Savickas : I like to think of this not so much as change...there is external changes occurring to them. There are transitions that they are facing in life. something new is about to begin and they're standing at a point in which the old no longer works and the new hasn't arrived yet, and in this watch, in this gap we try and help them draw up a biographical meaning, to bridge the gap, to move from old to new, so...it might be change but I prefer to call it development. they become more than they were

Jon Carlson : Are there strategies or techniques that one uses in this kind of work?

Mark Savickas : I use a very systematic, straightforward approach. I try and find out how I can be useful to the person, what they want out of us working together, and then, for the self-analysis, I have six favourite questions that I have. The goal of the questions is to elicit stories and ... just prompt to tell me stories because all the stories share a pattern, share a theme and then when they have responded with the last set of stories I try and make a transition to them looking at their stories and try their own meaning from their stories and then relate that meaning to why they came in today.

Jon Carlson : This sounds so different, though. When I think of career counselling I'm thinking of you sitting before a computer and you typing all the information... and this match that comes up. I remember when I was in school I was interested in cars like all kids were and I was probably interested in psychology, so they thought I'd have to work in a car diagnostic center, which would have probably been fatal for me and the cars. It just didn't fit at all. Do you still do that kind of thing?

Mark Savickas : The question you are asking makes me feel very sad because I believe... talking to people about planning their life and designing and constructing who they are is such an exciting work, and meaningful work. We are not attracting enough young professional to do that work because we're still training them to do things the way they did in World War 2. All I can say, it makes me sad because they're not exposed to the joys of this work and I think if more you're exposed more you gravitate towards it.

Jon Carlson : So you don't read the The Dictionary Of Occupational Titles and see if we can find one that's me...

Mark Savickas : It used to be the textbook, as you know, The Dictionary Of Occupational Titles, but... in my classes we talk about... I start with "What does life mean to you", work friends and love is the most important thing about life: then we need.. once we are committed to those roles we need to choose what kind of work, who to love and what friends to associate with.

Jon Carlson : sothe basic tasks of life.

Mark Savickas : It's basic tasks and it's a rich common sense. For me, the first choice is :Will I work? And for some clients, some people that's initial

Jon Carlson : yes, I know some of these people

Mark Savickas : and a secondary question, not as important is what type of work will I do?

Jon Carlson : So, what are the biggest challenges, or maybe obstacles one would face working in this area?

Mark Savickas : Well, personally, for me the biggest challenge is to...in working with the clients ...to keep the right balance between me being the advocate and ally and bound with the client and also representing reality and common sense and what's possible in the world of work, that the person doesn't...overvalue my opinions.

Jon Carlson : So, you have to be someone you don't create dependency upon yourself and you also have to be realistic, it sounds like.

Mark Savickas : Yes, ours is a delicate balance, because you don't want, er, squash somebody's dreams, but you also don't want to let them pursue something, not let them, but encourage them to pursue something that you might know is almost impossible. But, eh, luckily, we don't encounter that so often. Like with Tara, that was never really an issue.

Jon Carlson : Tara, that's the woman we are going to see in a moment, but before we talk about Tara....in psychology we often talk about the scientist and the practitioner, and that begs the question: is there a research support for the work that you do?

Mark Savickas : Yes, I believe career counselling has had some of the earliest studies that document outcomes, it's been since the mid thirties we had some of the meta-analysis of outcomes, so.. There is a rich long heritage, there's much literature, to show the treatment effects and the meta-analysis has first showed that individual was no more affected than groups, no more affected than classes. Now the most exciting new thing is ..people are researching what are the active ingredients of effective career counselling, trying to identify those, so for those who are interested there's a very good literature to start with. Our objectives are straightforward and we can measure how are we doing.

Jon Carlson : So, speaking of Tara before we are going to get the chance to watch you work with this young woman...Can you talk about some of the ingredients or some of the things that our viewer should look for in your work with Tara?

Mark Savickas : I would ask people to look for, and listen with me, for the theme of her life. I think the most beautiful thing to me is to see the pattern of the life unfold before her eyes. So...I invite our viewers to share the excitement of seeing the pattern develop as Tara talks.

Jon Carlson : I think that it would be important , too, for them to watch the questions that you use and how you make the environment so safe and comfortable, you know, for her... so

Mark Savickas : I'm glad you said that because to me the consulting room is a sacred space and more than anything the person must feel secure and That's number one, without that...When somebody says "I don't know what I'm interested in" , I hear "I don't feel safe with you". Because everyone has a dream and if they are unwilling to say they're protecting themselves. There's something that I have done, that others have done to scare them.

Jon Carlson : And so for you that's the sign that they need to make the things safer,

Mark Savickas : or help them. It doesn't often happen to me, but when I hear that that's how I hear that, so it's a very, very critical thing. I'm glad you highlighted it.

Jon Carlson : well, let's watch Tara's theme and pattern and the stories unfold

Mark Savickas : Great!