

Article 40

Assessing Family Influence in Career Decision Making

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Assessing family influence in career counseling intertwines with current contextual theory. Career decision theory has evolved beyond the epistemology of logical positivism to include contextual and relationship factors. Career literature now reflects how practitioners can utilize the family in the career counseling process (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005).

Accordingly, examples of available assessment measures, including retrospective questionnaires, career genograms, career-o-grams, and critical incident techniques, are described herein. While these assessment methods are clearly applicable to the career counseling process, they are time intensive and clinically demanding.

Retrospective Questionnaires

Counselors commonly assess family influence through the use of their own retrospective questionnaires. The following are representative instruments found both in the literature and made available in unpublished form.

Amundson's Significant Other Questionnaire

Amundson (1998) has created a unique clinical approach by inviting significant family members like parents and siblings into the counseling process. They are asked to give their perspectives on a client's abilities, interests, and personal characteristics. Information is obtained by eliciting feedback on the following questionnaire:

1. What would you say this person is good at?
What skills has this person demonstrated?
2. What would you see as this person's major interest areas?
3. How would you describe the personal characteristics of this person?
4. What positive changes have you noticed over time in this person, especially in relation to work or looking for work?
5. In what ways could this person improve?
6. If you were to suggest the ideal job or career prospects for this person, what would it be?
(p. 172)

Amundson suggested that the counselor work with the client to decide who would be among the best choices to provide this information. Evaluative information, perceptions, fantasies, and family myths can all be extracted from the information provided.

Taylor's Family Work History

Taylor (2003) has created a family history worksheet that is multigenerational. She requests that people interview six individual family members or close family friends from at least three different generations (cohorts, parents, grandparents).

With the selection of the six people, she asks that clients gather information about the first paid experiences of the interviewees. Interviewees are also asked to describe their favorite job and employer. Then they are asked about their current work or their last full-time paid experience. To complete the exercise, Taylor suggests that the interviewee give four tips or important pieces of advice to the client.

The following information is recorded from the six family members or friends:

- Your first work experience—paid or unpaid.
Your age and approximate year of the experience
Where did you work?
What did you do?
Was this full- or part-time?
What was the pay scale?
- What was your favorite job?
Where did you work?
What were the job responsibilities and duties?
Was this full- or part-time work?
What was the pay scale?
- What was your favorite company or employer?
What made this experience your favorite?

- What is your current work status?
Your age and approximate years of the experience
Where did you work?
What did you do?
Was this full- or part-time?
What was the pay scale?

- For those who are retired, the same questions from the current work status group are asked.
- A final, mentoring question is asked.
What are four tips or pieces of advice that you would offer to a family member regarding work and career development?

Taylor's history extracts the family's worldview about careers, and meaning making on the job. The family work history provides an opportunity for a client to explore some of the history that creates family myths and legends.

Family Constellation Questionnaire

Peterson and Gonzalez (2005) have created a family constellation questionnaire to assist with understanding family influence and building a career genogram. This tool serves as a guide to gather information regarding client contextual factors:

- Your racial and ethnic background
- Major influences in your career decisions
- Mother's occupation, father's occupation
- Number of brothers and sisters
- Your place in the birth order
- Education of parents
- Career expectations of the parents for the children
- Parents' marital status
- Occupations of all four grandparents
- How many times have you changed careers?
- Are you satisfied with your current career choice?

Peterson and Gonzalez have placed race and ethnic background at the forefront but also included requests for information that can lead to a discussion of the impact of birth order, sibling rivalry, and parental expectations. The family legacy is observed with information taken from three generations, and contextual factors like marital status are given a more prominent focus.

Chope's Family Protocol

Using variables from professional experience as well as relevant research on relational influences (Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi, & Glasscock, 2001; Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001) Chope (2006) developed the following instrument for practitioners to elicit historical information:

1. What kind of career related information did the family provide?
 - A. Did the family help you generate different possibilities and new experiences?
 - B. What alternatives did the family suggest regarding schools, training, or careers? How did these affect you?
 - C. What was the family's impression of gender roles? How did these affect you?
 - D. What family traditions or legends existed?
 - E. Was there any forced guidance, a tendency to push you in a direction more reflective of the family's interests than yours?
2. What tangible assistance was provided and were there any strings attached?
 - A. Were tuition, books, and supplies provided?
 - B. Was transportation provided to attend school or get to a job?
 - C. Was housing provided or made available?
 - D. Were incidentals taken care of?
 - E. Was health insurance paid for until the age of 23?
3. What type of emotional support did the family provide?
 - A. How certain were you that emotional support would be available, no matter what?
 - B. Did the family take a hands off but supportive approach?
 - C. Was there subtle emotional pressure to pursue a particular path?
 - D. Were you told by the family to "just be happy"?
 - E. Were you told that your plans wouldn't amount to much?
 - F. Who was supportive and who wasn't?
4. Were you concerned about the impact of your career choice on the family?
5. What disruptive family events affected you or other members of the family?
6. What were the actions of family members who were asked to help and actions of those who were not asked to help?

- A. Of those who were involved, which were welcomed and which were not?
- B. Of those who were asked to help, who offered assistance and who did not?

Counselors may notice that these questions point to the projected fantasies of the family. The questions inform counselors of the family's impressions of particular roles that men and women play in the workforce.

What is clear from retrospective questionnaires is that hypotheses can evolve from the data and the subsequent client narrative. It is also clear that the retrospective questionnaire technique demands that the counselor be well skilled in asking follow-up questions.

The Career Genogram

The career genogram (Okiishi, 1987), an occupational family tree, is the most commonly recognized instrument for gathering information about the influence of the family. Genograms can easily be completed at home by the client or in the office with the help of a counselor.

The genogram pictorially informs the exploration of current as well as multigenerational career development patterns. The roles, behaviors, and attitudes of family members can be mined with this tool. Family patterns of all types can be pointed out and the pressures of differential family standards can be discussed.

Creating a family genogram necessitates that the client gather pertinent information from extended family members. The genogram allows for understanding the origin of career expectations from the family and can help pinpoint family judgments about career choices and definitions of success. The genogram is not standardized, so there are many different ways of constructing one. Currently there are over 8,000 genogram Web sites on the Internet.

Using a genogram may not be for everyone. Some clients may find that it is too personal and is not consistent with their understanding of what career counseling is. Counseling with the genogram demands a high level of clinical skill.

Career-O-Gram

Like the genogram, the career-o-gram (Thorngren & Feit, 2001) allows clients to explore family contextual issues through a pictorial representation. With a focus upon career history, it is used to assess the many contextual influences on a person's career decision-making process. Gathering information takes place with appropriate clinical questions (Thorngren & Feit, 2001, p. 295).

Recall your earliest career ambition:

- How old were you when you developed this goal?
- What important people in your life encouraged/discouraged you in this pursuit?
- What aspects of this career most appealed to you?
- What were your chances of obtaining this position?
- What did you think you would have to do to attain this goal?

Some questions of a multicultural and multiethnic nature can also be added (p. 295):

- Was that choice similar to that of other people in your culture?
- What messages did you receive as a male/female about your career choice?
- What was going on in the world around you when you made that choice?
- Who influenced your political views?

Answers to these and other questions are placed on a chart with symbols. Beginning with the earliest career goal, the counselor asks about the client's other goals and jobs. Each of the benchmarks is recorded with a symbol: a circle represents the client's career development stage, a rectangle reflects a major goal or job, diamonds illustrate interpersonal relationships, and large arrows indicate particular themes in the client's life while thin arrows are used to show the relationships among the variables.

The career-o-gram can be completed in a session or two. The questions that are used to gather information are not scripted as with the retrospective questionnaires, and the pictorial representation does not resemble the family tree of the genogram. Instead, it stages the client's contextual influences and illustrates the relationships between them. The career-o-gram can be also used to understand the pattern of choices that an individual makes in educational and vocational pursuits.

Critical Incidents

Time lines have been a hallmark of developmental career theory (Super, 1990). Using a time line, clients may explore the critical incidents that have taken place that could be considered disruptive or enhancing to their career paths.

Clients may draw a horizontal line and break it up into 5-year increments with the line extending from birth until the present. In each 5-year interval, the client

can write down five critical events that may have impacted their career decision making. These events can be personal or related to the news events that were taking place. After enumerating the critical incidents, the client can review what needs to be done to overcome some of the clinical issues that may have been enhanced by the critical incidents.

Conclusion

So what can be understood with the assessment of family influence? Family assessment opens new possibilities for career counselors. There is little question that the instruments available have been drawn into the practices of many career counselors. There are undoubtedly many other unpublished instruments that counselors have created for themselves.

The gathering of family historical data allows for the evaluation and understanding of family interaction patterns and the family's definition of success. The tools may assist rethinking traditional measures of success, and counselors can help clients to characterize success with the meaning it gives to their lives. Learning about multigenerational family history can be encouraging.

Family assessment can open up innovative family contributions. A supportive family will teach the possibility of forging new connections and networks. Clients who have developed a sense of connectedness and partnerships through family networking are in a better position to develop stronger social connections and employment networks. The family has the power to assist with this process.

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