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Life Trajectories: Teaching Counselors How to Assist Clients With Their Working Lives

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Abstract

Counselors must be prepared to meet clients' needs regarding the trauma, coping, and transitions of their working lives. The authors call for training counselors to use updated theories and techniques to conceptualize and address client career concerns in holistic practice. Authors discuss the lineage of the life design paradigm of counseling including career construction theory, the career construction interview, and narrative methods. The article provides a useful lesson plan counselor educators may implement to introduce life design and to enable counseling students to develop career intervention skills through experiential learning.

Economic turmoil and world of work changes have presented new transitions and work traumas (Savickas, 2005) making it increasingly important for counselors to be prepared to address client career concerns. People can no longer count on linear advancement in a company; instead career progression is characterized as a series of projects or tasks completed for many different companies. Frequent or sustained unemployment adds additional psychological and social stressors to individuals and families (Lara & Kindsvatter, 2010). In the context of the rapidly changing world of work, difficulty finding employment, and heavy debt loads incurred through postsecondary education, initial career deciders face identity development and a struggle to self-author their lives (Baxter-Magolda, 2008). These conditions heighten worker uncertainty and anxiety (Savickas et al., 2009), in turn creating the need for workers to make adjustments and seek coping strategies. Beginning with the work of Parsons in the

1900s, counseling professionals have been assisting clients with vocational choice, adjustments, and coping. This article makes a case for equipping all counselors to address client career concerns by embracing a holistic, developmental, and preventive conceptualization of the counselor's role. The article includes a lesson plan designed to emphasize the use of life stories in counseling and to introduce the life design paradigm (Savickas et al., 2009).

Just as the world of work has changed, advances have been made in the theoretical and practice knowledge base regarding career development. Counselors must be equipped with updated theories and techniques to address client career concerns and to facilitate client agency, creativity, and adaptability in the changing work landscape (Brott, 2001; Chope, 2008; Collin, 2007; Maree, 2010; Savickas, 1993). Life design, a new paradigm for counseling, synthesizes the aforementioned aspects and encompasses career construction theory and the Career Construction Interview (CCI). Life design offers useful theory and techniques for assisting clients to cope with traumas and to navigate choices and changes associated with their working lives (Savickas, 1989, 2005, 2011, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009). Unfortunately, counseling practice has not kept up with the life design paradigm, career construction theory, and associated narrative techniques useful in assisting clients with career concerns.

From a holistic perspective, all counselors should be prepared to address client career issues; therefore, consideration of effective methods of instruction in counselor education is warranted (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). Lara, Kline, and Paulson (2011) called attention to the impact teaching methods and activities have on students' perception of career counseling. The authors found that some instructors had to initially debunk possible negative misconceptions about career counseling and that, "application-oriented and hands-on teaching resulted in participants increasing their self-understanding, grasping theory application, and developing positive attitudes" (Lara et al., 2011, p. 437). Tang et al. (2004) also noted that hands on practice increased counselor trainees' confidence to perform counseling tasks. McAuliffe and Eriksen (2002) also promoted the use of experiential learning by identifying experience to be one of the most prominent influences on the development of counselors in training. Dollarhide, Smith, and Lemberger (2007) suggested the use of socially constructed and transparent counseling pedagogy promoted critical thinking in counseling practice and that such methods used in theories courses enhanced case conceptualization skills.

Building upon the merits of experiential pedagogy, Krieshok and Pelsma (2002) emphasized the importance of students' ability to listen for and understand clients through their unique stories. There is extensive literature that supports the utilization of stories in counselor education and pedagogy in general (Abrahamson, 1998; Garrett, 2006; Martin, 2000; McQuiggan, Robinson, & Lester, 2010). Torres, Ottens, and Johnson (1997) found the use of cultural autobiographies to be incredibly helpful in multicultural counseling pedagogy. As related to teaching holistic practice and preparing counselors to recognize and address client career concerns, Rehfuss (2009) added that students responded positively to the inclusion of Savickas' career construction theory in a counseling theories course. Additionally, students expressed that the opportunity to practice the CCI with their clients helped to validate the theory for them (Rehfuss, 2009). While the literature reveals that many different approaches to counseling pedagogy exist, the utility of hearing and understanding clients' stories in addition to experience-based

practices is evident. The lesson plan provided in this article adheres to constructivist pedagogy and is oriented to equip counselor educators with a guide to introduce future counselors to the holistic and developmental aspects of life design and contemporary career counseling.

Life Trajectories: Paradigm, Theory, and Method

The purpose of this lesson is to introduce life design, a contemporary paradigm, and encourage counselors to reconceptualize their role in addressing clients' career concerns (Savickas et al., 2009). According to Savickas et al. (2009),

A major consequence of the interconnectedness between the different life domains is that we can no longer speak confidently of "career development" nor of "vocational guidance." Rather, we should envision "life trajectories" in which individuals progressively design and build their own lives, including their work careers. (p. 241)

Therefore, even when work is not a salient role in a client's life, life design counseling is useful in that the process encourages "self-construction through all life roles" (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 244). In order to meet the needs of 21st century clients, counselors facilitate clients' use of meaningful activities/work to shape identity, construct careers, and to become more whole (Savickas, 2010, 2011). Counselors are necessarily engaged in supporting clients as they navigate life transitions prompted by changes in relationships, health, and employment (Savickas et al., 2009). The following lesson is appropriate for use with master's and doctoral level students, as well as in professional development for counselors and can be implemented in Introduction to Counseling, Counseling Theories, and/or Career Counseling courses.

Life Design

Overview

Traditional approaches to career interventions known as vocational guidance and career education utilize "test and tell" methods in addressing clients' career concerns. Objective measures of interests, values, needs, and abilities decontextualize the client's experience discounting individual differences (Taber, Hartung, Briddick, Briddick, & Rehfuess, 2011). These practices, while useful, sacrifice the art of counseling. Advances have been made in integrating the postmodern perspective of narrative methods in addressing clients' career concerns. This synthesizing has led to a broader and more holistic view that helps clients understand how they can use work to make their lives more whole. This lesson introduces life design as a framework for helping people with their working lives that is "structured to be life-long, holistic, contextual, and preventive" (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 240).

Learning Objectives

The goal of this lesson is to facilitate students' understanding of the holistic nature of counseling. Students will gain an understanding of the life design paradigm and career intervention contrasted with matching models. Students will actively engage in

listening to a life story narrative and honing their abilities to accurately hear and identify themes.

Time

The didactic portion of this lesson will take approximately 1.5 hours. The experiential component of the lesson and discussion can be completed in 1 hour with a class or group size of about 30 students.

Materials

A personal narrative such as those available in StoryCorps on the National Public Radio Web site (<http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps>); a written case story crafted by the instructor (see Niles, Goodman, & Pope, 2013); or the instructor may enlist a faculty colleague to share his/her career story.

Content Instruction

The content portion of this lesson encompasses the use of life stories in counseling, describing the world of work changes necessitating that counselors be prepared to address client career concerns, and life design process, goals, presuppositions, and intervention model.

Describe and explain the power of using life stories in counseling (see Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Explain shifts in the world of work that necessitate that counselors be equipped to address client career concerns and the utility of a new paradigm for career interventions (Savickas et al., 2009). For example, the 20th century narrative of a career described staying within one employer and advancing for 30 years. Employment is conceptualized differently today as individuals can expect more frequent employment transitions as they move from different jobs, assignments, or projects. The social contract of longevity and security with employers has been disrupted leaving individuals insecure and anxious in the world of work (Savickas, 2012).

Provide an overview of life design contrasting it to vocational guidance and career education (see Savickas, 2012; Savickas et al., 2009; and Table 1 below). Life design offers a broader conceptualization of an individual's life career in which interventions engage clients in reflecting upon how they make use of their attributes and strengths in their personal and work contexts to build their lives, thereby resolving their needs. Life design is an approach to answering, "How may individuals best design their own lives in the human society in which they live?" (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 241). Reflecting on self, receiving feedback, and imagining possible selves are integrated into the process of decision making and constructing careers that express the clients' self-concepts (Savickas et al., 2009; Savickas, 2011).

Further explain how life design represents a shift in thinking by reviewing the five presuppositions of life-design counseling: ecological contexts, complex dynamics, non-linear causalities, multiple subjective realities, and dynamical modeling (see Savickas et al., 2009). The life design intervention model extends from these presuppositions and acknowledges the individual's context and meaning making while "fostering adaptability, narratability, activity, and intentionality" (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 245).

Table 1

Paradigms for Career Interventions (Savickas, 2012, p. 15)

Vocational Guidance	Career Education	Life Design
Enhance self-knowledge	Assess development status	Construct career through small stories
Increase occupational knowledge	Orient the individual to imminent developmental tasks	Deconstruct these stories and reconstruct them into an identity narrative or life portrait
Match self to occupation	Develop the attitudes and competencies needed to master those tasks	Co-construct intentions that lead to the next action episode in the real world

The final portion of the didactic lesson is to review and clarify the six steps in the life design intervention model (see Savickas et al., 2009). “The intervention model for life designing relies on stories and activities rather than test scores and profile interpretations” (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 246). This narrative approach enables clients to examine and resolve problems by designing their lives.

Experiential Activity

This activity allows students to practice introductory skills associated with life design intervention, namely listening skills. Direct students to divide a sheet of paper into two sections with the headings: Similar Repeated Words and Verbs. As students listen to the life story presented live or via media described in the materials section, they will note their observations of the similar repeated words they hear and verbs or action words they hear in the story.

If the storytelling was completed live, the instructor and students may ask the storyteller to clarify, confirm, or share information to facilitate student learning. After the storytelling is complete, guide students in a discussion to explore the meanings and themes evident in the story.

Suggested Discussion Questions

Discussion questions are designed to process the experiential activity, to connect the activity to the didactic content, and to reinforce learning regarding the use of stories in holistic counseling practice.

1. What words did the storyteller repeat? How might these repeat words represent themes evident in the story?
2. What verbs did the storyteller use? Were there any repeated action words? How might these repeated verbs portray action the storyteller may take to resolve or address an issue or dilemma s/he had to overcome?
3. What do people’s narratives reveal about them?

4. How is listening to the narratives useful in addressing life career concerns?
5. Taking into consideration the intersection of a clients' working life with other roles and domains of life, how does your new understanding of life design challenge or confirm your thinking regarding your role in addressing client career concerns?

Summary

This lesson was constructed to introduce the life design paradigm and to exercise counselors' listening skills. Through the utilization of stories, students were able to sharpen their abilities to look for themes present within a personal narrative. The lesson plan utilized methods validated in the counseling literature to aid in students' understanding and practice counseling skills to address client career concerns.

Next Steps

The next step in counselor training related to addressing clients' working lives is to provide theory and technique. Rehfuss (2009) offered an excellent approach to teaching career construction theory and the CCI. Taber et al. (2011) provided an informative description of the CCI (Savickas, 2011) with an instructive case study that could easily be incorporated into a lesson. Further, *My Career Story: An Autobiographical Workbook for Life-Career Success* (Savickas & Hartung, 2012) is available at www.vocopher.com and can be used as a homework assignment. Career construction (Savickas, 2005) is part of life design counseling in that it pertains to the work role; however, life design counseling encompasses all life roles and guides clients to resolve problems and to construct meaningful and fulfilling lives.

In addition to fitting with career construction theory and the career construction interview, this lesson could also be an excellent preface for introducing students to narrative therapy. Additional resources on narrative therapy include Semmler and Williams (2000), White (2007), and Hibbel and Polanco (2010).

It is important that counselor educators debunk belief in the career vs. personal counseling dichotomy and train all counselors to recognize and address client career concerns. The life design paradigm provides new language and advances narrative methods compatible with counseling practice that no longer solely relegates addressing work related issues to career specialists. The new paradigm encourages counselors to re-embrace the spirit of the practice from which our profession originated in a way that requires professional counseling skills and that fits with narrative and constructivist approaches to counseling.

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