

MULTICULTURAL CAREER COUNSELING: TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

Lonnie Ray Armstrong Jr.
Graduate Student, CAGS in School Psychology Program, Rivier College

Abstract

As our society continues to become more diverse, there is a need to ensure that the career counseling theories and techniques used with clients reflect cultural sensitivity. This article will look at the career development models that are being used to integrate cultural perspectives into career counseling. These career development models include the systems theory framework and the ecological perspective. How career development has changed to include multicultural perspectives, factors involved in multicultural career development, and the career development models that have been included to improve multicultural career counseling will be discussed.

As populations change from homogenous groups to a mosaic of people with diverse customs and cultures, career counselors must shift their perspectives from monoculturalism to multiculturalism (Hartung, 2002, Leong & Hartung, 2000). This growing recognition of the need for context-sensitive career counseling and development that acknowledges the impact of a client's cultural context on their career behavior has become an essential part of providing multicultural career counseling (Byars-Winston, Fouad, 2006). Additionally, career counselors need to examine how culture is represented in theories of career development and in models of career counseling (McMahon, 2005). Stead (2004) argued that career development models are cultural constructions that make only occasional reference to cultural issues. He pointed out that these models "seldom demonstrate an in-depth perspective of how cultural issues play a role in career choice and career decision-making" (p.397). Understanding career development models is helpful because they reduce a complex range of behaviors to usable explanations, constructs, relationships, and, to some extent, predictions (Young, Marshall, Valach, 2007). Career development models also represent the way in which counselors and researchers have organized knowledge in the field of career counseling (Young, Marshall, Valach, 2007).

Traditionally, models of career development evolved at a time when the typical worker was visualized as young, male, white, able bodied, publicly heterosexual, and ethnically homogeneous (Cook, Heppner, O'Brien, 2005). There has been increasing recognition of cultural influences on career development which has prompted a call for theoretical and practical perspectives to increase the cultural validity of career development practices (Leong, Brown, 1995). Career development models must accommodate the multiple experiences of people from diverse and ethnic backgrounds (Cook, Heppner, O'Brien, 2005). These experiences range from shared group to idiosyncratic and from social-legal influences on the national level (e.g. civil rights legislation) to the individuals daily constructing of the meaningfulness of their ongoing experience (Cook, Heppner, O'Brien, 2005). These models must also share the view that to be effective in understanding and evaluating their client's career concerns, career counselors need to understand their own experiences by being aware of the many cultural contexts in

which they themselves live and how these contexts have shaped their career related opportunities, values, and beliefs (Bingham, Ward, 1994, 1997). There are two career development models that aim at including the multicultural perspective. These models are the systems theory framework (STF) and the ecological perspective.

The STF is a theoretical foundation that accounts for the systems of influence on people's career development, including individual, social and environmental/social contexts (Arthur, McMahon, 2005). Systems theory examines the interconnections between internal and external variables that have an impact on a person's career development. STF is also a theoretical lens that will allow for examination of both a macroanalysis of external influences on people's lives while also facilitating a microanalysis of factors that are relevant for the career and development of individual clients (Arthur, McMahon, 2005). The term influence is deliberately used by developers of the STF as a dynamic term capable of reflecting both content and process components of career theory. Content influences include (a) interpersonal variables such as personality and age and (b) contextual variables that comprise both social influences, such as family, and environmental/societal influences, such as geographic location. The process influences include recursiveness (both within the individual and between the individual and the context), change over time and chance (McMahon, 2005). The context and process influences are represented in the STF as a circular depiction of the many complex and interconnected systems within and between which career development occurs. At the heart of the STF is the individual system, comprising a range of intrapersonal influences such as a gender, interest, age, abilities, personality and sexual orientation (Arthur, McMahon, 2005).

For career counselors who would like to use STF there are a number of conceptual understandings about the individual, systematic thinking, story and recursiveness that may provide a theoretical base (McMahon, 2005). Additionally, the STF provides career counselors with a theoretical foundation from which to consider the salience of culture as experienced by clients in the contexts of their lives. This knowledge will allow the counselor to design interventions that are grounded in the individual, contextual, and environmental/social systems of the client (Arthur, McMahon, 2005). Essentially, the STF (Patton, McMahon, 1999) provides a map to guide career counselors as they encourage clients to fill in the details and reality of the map through the telling of their career stories (McMahon, Patton, 2003). An important thing to remember about system approaches is the "Ongoing relationship, between elements or subsystems of the system and the changes that occur over time as a result of these continual interactions" (Patton, McMahon, 2005).

A common approach to addressing women's career development concerns has been the use of the ecological perspective. The ecological perspective can be used to aid career counselors in appreciating the complexity of factors that shape the career patterns of women of color and white women. The ecological perspective also attempts to place both ethnicity and gender at the core of understanding human behavior and how it affects career development (Cook, Heppner, O'Brien, 2005). In an ecological approach to career counseling, the focus typically remains the client, but the goals and methods of the ecological career counselor are explicitly intended to shape optimal person-environmental interactions for individuals to develop vocationally (Conyne et al. 2000). The environment represents an essential body of information about opportunities, rewards, and obstacles that an individual must reconcile with her or his career preferences. Career interventions are intended to maximize the quantity and quality of information the individual can then use in personal decision making (Cook, Heppner, O'Brien, 2002).

When using the ecological approach, the career counselor must pay particular attention to how women of color and white women assign importance to the needs of significant others and family

MULTICULTURAL CAREER COUNSELING: TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

members in their career decision, and how these factors affect women's human behavior throughout the career decision making process (Cook, Heppner, O'Brien, 2002).

The ecological perspective suggests that human behavior results from the dialectic between the person and the environment (Cook, Heppner, O'Brien, 2005). Bronfenbrenner (1977) has identified four major subsystems that influence human behavior: (a) microsystems include the interpersonal interaction within a given environment, such as home, school, or work setting; (b) mesosystems comprise interactions between two or more microsystems, such as the relations between an individual's school and his or her work environment; (c) exosystems consist of linkages between subsystems that indirectly influence the individual, such as one's neighborhood or the media; and (d) macrosystems are the ideological components of a given society including norms and values (Cook, Heppner, O'Brien, 2005). The subsystems of the macrosystems and the microsystems in interaction with the individual are particularly useful in explaining career behavior (Cook, Heppner, O'Brien, 2002). Thus, in ecological career counseling, the counselor is challenged to make the environment more helpful and affirming for the individual, and also to help the client gain skills to cope successfully in the environment by changing their behavior (Cook, Heppner, O'Brien, 2005).

The current limitation of these career development models is that there is not enough evidence to support the effectiveness of them. A research synthesis of the role of culture in each separate step of the CACCM (Ihle Helledy et al., 2004) concluded that the evidence indicated "preliminary validation for the influence of cultural variables in the career counseling process" (p.276), but research has not explicitly focused on whether the inclusion of culture variables in career counseling is more effective than traditional career counseling (Byars-Wintson, Fouad, 2006). Also, these models focus mainly on the counselor gaining knowledge of the client's cultural contexts and minimally talks about the importance of the counselor's cultural contexts and perspectives in the counseling process (Byars-Wintson, Fouad, 2006).

Further research must be conducted to see if the inclusion of cultural variables into the career development models used with diverse clients improves the career counseling process. The research must include how culture affects the career counseling process and how career development models can be changed to improve the career development of diverse clients. Career development models must continue to improve and the best methods of inclusion must continue to be revisited in order to provide diverse clients with the best possible career counseling practices.

References

- Arthur, Nancy, McMahon, Mary (2005). Multicultural Career Counseling: Theoretical Applications of the Systems Theory Framework. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 53 (3); p. 208.
- Byars-Winston, Angela M., Fouad, Nadya A., (2006). Metacognition and Multicultural Competence: Expanding the Culturally Appropriate Career Counseling Model. *The Career Development Quarterly*. 54 (3); p. 187.
- Cook, Ellen P., Heppner, Mary J., O'Brien, Karen M., (2002). Career Development of Women of Color and White Women: Assumptions, Conceptualization, and Interventions from an Ecological Perspective. *The Career Development Quarterly*. 50 (4); p.37.
- Cook, Ellen P., Heppner, Mary J., O'Brien, Karen M., (2005). Multicultural Influences in Women's Career Development: An Ecological Perspective. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*. 33 (3); p. 165.

Marshall, Sheila K., Young, Richard A., Valach, Ladislav (2007). Making Career Theories More Culturally Sensitive: Implications for Counseling. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 56 (1); p. 4.
McMahon, Mary (2005). Career Counseling: Applying the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development. *Journal of Employment Counseling*. 42 (1); p. 29.

* **LONNIE R. ARMSTRONG Jr.** is originally from Fresno, CA. He served in the Armed Forces Department of the Navy for seven years. He earned his B.A. in American Studies from Franklin Pierce College in 2006 and his M. Ed. in Educational Studies from Rivier College in 2007. He is currently in the CAGS program in school psychology at Rivier College. He resides in Nashua, NH.