
Embedded Selves: Co-constructing a relationally based career workshop for rural girls

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ABSTRACT

As economic, technological, and social changes transform rural areas, female youth face particular challenges in making educational/career decisions. Relationships within the community enhance and constrain future paths. Building on an earlier research study (Shepard, 2004), the co-construction of a community-based workshop with research participants is described. Workshop activities are clustered under three topic areas: knowledge of me in my local worlds; knowledge of the world of work inside and outside my community; and strengthening my future. Practical guidelines for career counsellors are provided, including the importance of developmentally appropriate experiences and contextual relevance. Workshop adaptation and extension are outlined.

RÉSUMÉ

À mesure que des changements économiques, technologiques et sociaux transforment les zones rurales, les jeunes filles doivent relever des défis particuliers dans leurs décisions d'éducation ou de carrière. Les relations au sein de la collectivité améliorent et limitent les perspectives d'avenir. S'appuyant sur une recherche antérieure (Shepard, 2004), la construction d'un atelier basé dans la collectivité en collaboration avec les participants à la recherche est décrite. Les activités de l'atelier sont groupées sous trois thématiques : *connaissance de moi dans mes mondes locaux; connaissance du monde du travail à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de ma collectivité; renforcer mon avenir*. Des lignes directrices pratiques sont mises à la disposition des conseillers d'orientation, y compris l'importance d'expériences adaptées au développement et la pertinence du contexte. L'adaptation et l'extension de l'atelier sont indiquées dans les grandes lignes.

Rural young women, in comparison to their urban counterparts, have unique circumstances to contend with when considering their life-career paths. Despite the diversity of the rural population, certain socio-cultural factors are common characteristics of rural communities. Reduced access to higher education, limited school curricula, limited exposure to a range of occupations, and few role models have been identified (Canadian Rural Partnership, 2000; Phimister, Vera-Toscano, & Weersink, 2001). Rural female employment rates in Canada are significantly below the rates found in urban centres, and the work available tends to be menial and low-paying with little or no opportunity for economic advancement (Phimister et al.). As economic, technological, and social changes continue to transform rural areas, female youth face particular challenges as they attempt to make decisions about education and career. Therefore, career interventions and models that may be effective in urban settings do not necessarily represent the best solutions for rural young women.

Earlier research with eight young rural women (aged 17–19) highlighted the importance of supportive relationships, adult role models, a caring community, and positive school climate in addressing post-secondary school transitions (Shepard, 2004). When I returned to the community to disseminate the research findings, six participants suggested that a community-based career workshop for local young women needed to be created and put into practice. Participants identified the need to integrate lifestyle and career information in personally relevant ways. In addition, participants acknowledged the centrality of relationships in their lives and believed that career interventions must enhance their ability to develop other effective relationships within and outside their community. With this feedback, it was decided that a group format involving school personnel and community members would be appropriate for facilitating young women's life-career development in this rural community. The use of groups for young women is supported by a number of recent projects (Banister, Tate, Wright, Rinzema, & Flato, 2002; Wilkinson, 1998). Group approaches provide opportunities for female youth to share their experiences and to construct and validate their self-identities. Gilligan (1996) notes "the ability to speak in relationship, to keep the inner world in the outer world, and to create and maintain resonant and responsive relationships are the grounds of girls' psychological strength and resilience" (p. 257).

In this article, I describe the development and implementation of a workshop based on an earlier research study (Shepard, 2004) that focused on the life-career development and planning of rural female youth. To provide background, a brief review of the literature on relevant concepts including ecological perspectives, self-in-relation theory, and the construct of the embedded identity is provided. Next, the workshop development process is explained and the co-constructed workshop is described. Practical guidelines for career counsellors are provided and future directions are outlined.

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Ecological Perspective

Young women negotiate their identity, belief systems, and life course within the combination of physical, social, political, economic, and cultural environments that they occupy (Blustein, 1997; Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002). Perceptions of gender and family roles, the goals one sets, resources obtainable, and the kind of information provided about opportunities are affected by the interactions among the countless features of one's life space (Cook et al.). For example, a young woman living on a dairy farm in the interior of British Columbia interacts with a particular group of people and participates in particular family and community events, all of which affect how she views life and work for her in the future. In contrast, a young woman living in a fishing village on Vancouver Island has a different life context, which will be reflected in her views of herself in the future.

An ecological perspective encourages greater understanding of the ways in which environmental factors impact the career development of women. Environmental and individual factors are integral influences on their life-career development and decision-making processes (Cook et al., 2002; Flum, 2001; O'Brien, Friedman, Tipton, & Linn, 2000; Schultheiss, 2003). Environmental impacts include structural factors that limit access to or provide opportunities in the occupational environment, while cultural factors include socialized beliefs and attitudes that are often internalized by individuals (Cook et al.). Occupational stereotypes, lack of support for—or barriers to—feelings of efficacy, ambition in nontraditional occupations, gender-role socialization, and the messages received regarding motherhood affect women's life-career development (Fitzgerald & Betz, 1994). Messages at the macrosystem and microsystem levels need to be elicited. What are the roles of women in this community? What importance do women give to the care of significant others and family members in their career development? In what manner can the microsystem be influenced to enable female clients to access their voice or to access support through mentors?

Counselling from an ecological perspective emphasizes the lifelong dynamic interaction between female clients and their environments (Patton & McMahon, 1999; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986). A range of counselling approaches can assist female clients in changing their environment to elicit helpful or affirming support, in encouraging clients to recognize and perform skills to cope more effectively with the environment, or in attending to clients' emotional and cognitive responses that affect their interactions within the environment (Cook et al., 2002).

Self-in-Relation Theory

The concept of "self-in-relation" (Jordan, 1991) focuses attention on a self inseparable from a dynamic interaction. One does not lose one's sense of self in such interactions. Rather, relatedness with others brings clarity to the self. Relationships provide multidimensional sources of support including emotional, esteem, social, information, and tangible benefits (Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi, & Glasscock, 2001).

The adoption of a relationally based perspective acknowledges the interconnectedness of life-career development and relationships with others (Flum, 2001; Schultheiss, 2003) rather than emphasizing separation and independence. The deepening capacity for relationship building is viewed as a central goal for self-development and can inform the decision-making process (Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001). For example, three relationship themes have been identified in career decision-making: the involvement of others through the provision of support and information, the accessing of others' involvement to assist in the process of decision-making, and the active exclusion of others in the deliberation process (Phillips et al.).

The Embedded Self

While career theorists have traditionally assumed that career is a “vehicle or opportunity leading to realization of self” (Forrest & Mikolaitis, 1986, p. 86), the notion of the embedded or relational self (Blustein, 1994) refashions conventional views of the self into a more relational perspective. The concept of the “embedded identity” encompasses four groups of characteristics: (a) self-knowledge or core beliefs, values, and perceived traits; (b) degree of commitment or the extent to which one has internalized aspects of one’s identity; (c) familial factors such as support from family and significant others and one’s perceptions of those relationships; and (d) sociocultural factors that affect the development of identity, for instance, the amount of self-expression permitted in a given culture or social group (Blustein, 1994, p. 147). In effect, the concept of the embedded self incorporates both internal and external influences that contribute to one’s identity while also providing the relational aspects that influence identity formation.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE RELATIONALLY BASED COMMUNITY WORKSHOP

The idea for the workshop arose directly from participants’ feedback based on research conducted with young women living in a small community in southern British Columbia (Shepard, 2004). When I reconnected with participants to share results, they suggested that a locally developed career workshop be developed with input from research participants. This seemed like an excellent opportunity to consolidate my understanding of the research outcomes and to put the results into practice.

Major findings from the earlier research project indicated that relationships and social and structural opportunities and limitations influenced participants’ life-career development and decision-making processes. An overriding theme in their life stories was one of embeddedness in their families, in their friendships, and in their communities. Participants appeared to be “connected knowers” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986); for example, they were better able to make sense of occupational information when they received it informally from someone they knew in the community. Close scrutiny by community members created both feelings of vulnerability and visibility and feelings of safety and security (Shepard, 2004). The watchful eyes of the community constrained some participants from experimenting with a range of selves, while for other participants the community provided support for their experimentation. Participants also expressed strong attachment to their community (Shepard, 2002). Carter (1997) noted that “ties to a particular place are extremely strong in the rural site, and geography is closely allied with a sense of destiny” (p. 7). Understanding female development involves exploration of the complexity of relationships among contexts.

Such a perspective, based on a broader picture that includes place, class, gender, and ethnicity may provide ... insight into ways in which multiple discourse communities influence girls’

narratives of themselves and their journeys toward who they are becoming as relational and situational, but also as independent women. (Carter, p. 24)

After discussing the research results and implications, six of the eight participants who were interested in developing career interventions for local girls met to brainstorm ideas. The rural participants identified many career and life planning concerns—lack of self-knowledge, lack of information concerning local and provincial resources, and challenges in planning and decision-making. In developing activities for the workshop, I suggested that we build the activities around the concept of “hardiness” (Oullette, 1993) or the stance of an individual in relation to a stressful context. Each activity addressed at least one of the three key components of hardiness: control, commitment, and challenge (Funk, 1992). *Hardiness control* describes the capability of taking courses of action in stressful situations and of developing positive coping strategies. *Hardiness commitment* refers to one’s connection to others and the recognition that one has resources for support. *Hardiness challenge* refers to one’s ability to seek out support and to remain adaptable and determined in the face of change. We worked with our collective suggestions to develop a three-day workshop totalling 24 hours aimed at local female youth, aged 17–20.

Four participants expressed a desire to take part in the workshop as group members. Six additional rural girls were recruited to make a total of 10 workshop participants and two facilitators: the researcher and an interested parent with a teaching background.

DELIVERY OF THE COMMUNITY-BASED CAREER WORKSHOP

The workshop involved a series of interactive exercises that emphasized active engagement, group support, opportunities to reveal hidden strengths and resources, and cohesiveness between community and group members. Activities were clustered under three topic areas (Table 1).

Table 1
Workshop Topics and Activities

Topic Areas	Activities	Hardiness Concepts Addressed
Knowledge of me in my local worlds	Relational life-space mapping Reliable supports Expanding supports in my community	Control, commitment Control, commitment Control, commitment, challenges
Knowledge of the world of work inside and outside my community	Interactive panel Visiting a computer lab	Commitment Control, commitment, challenge
Strengthening my future	Making decisions with style Possible selves mapping Tossing in the hats activity	Control Control, commitment Control, challenge

Ground rules were established in the first session. Personal revelations and group discussions regarding them were to remain confidential. Members were supported in waiting until trust developed before discussing sensitive issues.

Knowledge of Me in My Local Worlds

The first day of the workshop involved exploring relational assets through three activities. The activities were relational life-space mapping, reliable supports, and expanding supports in my community.

Relational life-space mapping. Life-space mapping provided an opportunity for group members to map their social supports. Before developing their personal map, the group discussed social, physical, and economic community resources and identified what they valued and didn't value about their community. This dialogue served as a starting place in constructing personal maps. An examination of members' relational contexts involved mapping important resources (people, organizations, activities, etc.) on large sheets of paper. Group members represented themselves with a symbol in the centre of the page and webbed their supports with words and images. Line thickness, colours, and proximity to self were used to indicate relative importance of their relational contexts (both positively and negatively). Surprising connections were found in the narrative descriptions as members responded to open-ended questions: What type of support do you receive from this relationship? Where else do you receive that type of support? What is your perception of that relationship? How does this relationship influence your life-career plans? How do you see these influences unfolding in your immediate future?

Reliable supports. Group members were asked to identify the most influential relationship when they completed the mapping activity. They then worked in small groups, with each person taking a turn telling a story of a time when that relationship was particularly supportive and encouraging. The listeners noted ways the relationship served to support the group member. Relational strengths were recorded separately on small pieces of paper. At the end of the activity, members taped their strengths onto their clothing, to literally "wear" the strengths. Debriefing questions included: How do these fit for you? What is it like to wear these relational strengths? How could you use this relational strength? Who or what else provides you with similar relational strengths?

Expanding supports in my community. This activity was intended to pinpoint other possible sources of information and support within the community. During the second half of the first day, a number of female speakers who worked in the community shared their experiences. Non-traditional occupations were represented (a logger, an electrician, a mill worker) as well as more traditional occupations (a public health nurse, a retail entrepreneur, a pharmacist, an artist). Group members were interested in hearing how career decisions were made and how personal relationships were balanced with work. The discussions were informal, with presenters speaking to each other and building onto each other's stories. The presenters were highly responsive to the questions posed by group members

and shared their high school experiences and their decisions to have or not have children. All presenters noted what they called “turning points” or times when they participated in some activity that was life-changing. For example, one presenter discussed her involvement in the World Youth organization while another presenter described visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Presenters stressed the importance of exploring the world outside the community to provide new perspectives.

During this discussion, the idea of creating a local role model registry was put forth. Local women could share information about themselves and their chosen life-career paths on the Internet via the community website. Local girls could approach them via the Internet to set up personal meetings and to gain further career information.

Knowledge of the World of Work, Inside and Outside My Community

The second day of the workshop involved two components: an interactive panel of local key figures and a visit to a computer lab. The interactive panel was intended to increase group members’ community involvement. A panel of five local residents shared their ideas with group members and suggested ways that youth could be involved through mentoring projects, volunteer opportunities, experiential activities, and employment programs. One suggestion that arose from the discussion involved pairing a youth with an adult for each position on the local Youth Council, Restorative Justice Committee, and town council. Adult mentors could prepare young women for future roles by modelling strong communication skills, by helping them acquire skills in writing proposals, and by providing them with experience in articulating their ideas in a public forum. After some effort a list of local volunteer opportunities was developed, for example, volunteering at the recycling depot, with the historical society, and at the library. The panel felt strongly that more information about experiential activities outside the community would give youth a wider range of lifeskills. The editor of the local paper committed to providing a column in the newspaper about Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOFING), Students Working Abroad Program (SWAP), Katimavik, Canada World Youth, and church-led missions to other countries. Another panel member undertook to develop a reduced-cost youth program as part of her business as a wilderness guide, and a member from Community Futures proposed running workshops on entrepreneurship aimed at young women.

Use of the Internet to complement other sources of career information and other resources in career planning is essential (Zunker, 2002). Much to my surprise, during the research project (Shepard, 2004) participants indicated some resistance to using computers to access career information, although they enjoyed e-mailing friends and participating in chat rooms. In order to gain comfort and familiarity in using technology in career planning, we travelled to the college computer lab located some distance from the village to learn how to access and use career information on the World Wide Web. A college counsellor and a Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) worker were invaluable

able in sharing their expertise with sites and also engaged the girls in an informative talk about funding their education or training, finding summer jobs, and locating full-time work in larger centres. Through an open-ended discussion, the young women also presented some intriguing ideas for using the computer, for example, developing a local job shadow and work experience database for youth accessible through the village website.

Strengthening My Future

The focus for the final day was on developing decision-making strategies, mapping hopes and fears, and engaging in a variety of thinking processes. The three activities included making decisions with style, possible selves mapping, and tossing in the hats.

Making decisions with style. The purpose of this activity was to gain experience in decision-making, an area identified from the earlier research project as a difficult process. The large group was subdivided into two smaller ones and each group was given the following scenario. "Imagine that you are backpacking to one of the nearby mountains when a grizzly bear chases you. You drop your pack, hoping that the grizzly will take more interest in the pack than in you. As night approaches you have to make some decisions as you now have only a pocket knife with you." The group was given the following instructions: (a) Appoint one person to record all of your group's suggestions, (b) brainstorm some possible solutions, (c) after five minutes, vote for your group's two best solutions, (d) what are the positive reasons for choosing Solution A? Solution B? what are the reasons for not choosing Solution A? Solution B? (e) what observations did you make about your decision-making process? (f) how might you use this process in your everyday life?

Members were then instructed to think of a current difficult decision arising in personal, social, or educational contexts. A volunteer shared her important decision point, selecting a postsecondary institution. We made a list of criteria that were important for her to consider when making this decision (e.g., distance from home, knowing someone else who attended the institution) and wrote these in the first column of a decision-making chart in order of personal importance. Across the top of the page, we listed the post-secondary institutions to which she had applied. We then asked her to consider how well each institution met her criteria and to summarize her choice using this framework.

Possible selves mapping. Possible selves or identification of one's hopes and fears for the future can have a concrete impact on how people initiate and structure their actions, both in realizing positive possible selves and in preventing the realization of negative possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Since envisioning an action entails previewing a sequence of events that would likely accompany that action, the creation of elaborated possible selves achieving the sought-after goal has a direct impact on motivation. In this activity, participants were given green and yellow file cards (Shepard & Marshall, 1999). They were encouraged to write on the green cards as many hoped-for selves as came to mind putting

only one response on each card. The same procedure was repeated for feared selves, using the yellow cards. Participants ranked their hoped-for selves in order of importance and put a star on the card listing the self they felt most capable of becoming. These steps were repeated with feared selves. Results were displayed on a Possible Selves Map. In dyads, members elaborated on their most important hoped-for and feared selves, giving as much detail as possible. Members identified possible actions to increase the likelihood of their hopes and to decrease the likelihood of their fears. They also identified the resources needed to achieve (or prevent) these future selves.

Tossing in the hats activity. De Bono's (1995) "Six Thinking Hats" was used in order to facilitate adaptive, flexible thinking. For this activity, the larger group divided into two groups of five. Each member of the small group developed a case study loosely based on real-life events that included their possible selves and a decision point. Case studies provoke involvement and active experimentation with issues and allow youth to make connections with their own experiences and emotions (Kreber, 2001). Participants applied various thinking processes and perspectives based on the six thinking hats to each case study. Each small group member and one facilitator was given a different coloured party hat to wear that provided a visual and kinesthetic reminder of one of the six thinking modes. Red hat thinkers provided emotional responses and put forward hunches; white hat thinkers drew attention to available or missing information; green hat thinkers offered possibilities and alternatives; yellow hat thinkers focused on the benefits of a certain action and why it would be successful. Blue hat thinkers considered the necessary steps to be taken and the management of the thinking process by posing questions, for example, "What have we achieved so far?" Black hat thinkers provided a cautionary tone by noting any harmful outcomes. Six-hat thinking improves the ability to move from one type of thinking to another (De Bono). Young people may develop new perspectives, recognize their struggles, identify strengths and supports, and construct action plans when they hear other's ideas and suggestions. Hats were exchanged for each new case study presented.

At the end of the three-day workshop the young women identified and broadened their relational resources and increased peer group cohesiveness by practicing reciprocal listening and caring responses. Group members remarked on their increased ability to communicate effectively with each other. "Even my mom has noticed how I listen first ... where before I talked first and didn't really try to understand someone else's point of view." Several members noted that they were more likely to seek out adults in the community for information because of their positive experiences with adults in the workshop. One group member stated, "After this experience I know that I will be more open to sitting down and talking about the future with my friends and parents. I think I have more confidence in my ability to make myself understood and to make decisions, even if it's just the little daily decisions." I observed how group members actively engaged in the more difficult activities of planning and decision-making. While debriefing the activity on the third day, members reported that not enough time

was spent in school on the process of decision-making and planning. Based on extensive feedback provided by workshop participants, a four-weekend workshop is being developed. The workshop involves moving through four loops, continually building on and integrating experiences of the previous loops. The core activities presented in the three-day workshop are incorporated and several decision-making and planning activities are included.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREER COUNSELLORS

Comments and observations throughout the workshop underscored the importance of personal connections for participants. Debold, Brown, Weseen, and Brookins (1999) advise those who work with girls not to underemphasize the importance of connection with adults and community to girls' well-being. In understanding the struggle toward adulthood and the challenges in making life-path decisions, career counsellors can assist rural female youth in creating zones of hardiness by connecting to their own sense of self, developing a positive belief system, connecting to others who will engage with them, and experiencing support and encouragement to learn and persevere in times of transition and decision-making. Research findings indicate that even one adult with whom girls can talk and from whom they receive understanding and acceptance, provides a powerful safeguard in dealing with challenging issues such as life-career decisions (American Association of University Women, 1992; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Girls appear to have a developmental need for meaningful connectedness, especially with adult women (mothers, teachers, counsellors, etc.) who could act as a protective factor for them (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). Young women want opportunities to tell their stories to someone who can validate and empathize with their experiences. However, group members reported that they did not know many adults who took them seriously and gave them time to express their feelings. This was particularly true for those rural girls who felt cut off from social support systems or who were lacking in self-esteem. Career programs involving parents and other adults can provide "a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but also hearts and minds" (Delpit, 1995, p. 46). Girls need support from adults and institutions in order to move into the arena of possibilities; support, therefore, may include taking on an advocacy role.

When young women's awareness of relational needs is enhanced, they recognize that they don't have to struggle with life-career decisions in isolation. Young rural women can be empowered by emphasizing that while others' input is important, they are not to lose sight of their own needs. This group of young women learned from older women that the economic need of today's family usually demands two wage earners. Therefore, rural female youth must begin to lay out long-term goals for their lifetime work/careers including decisions as to whether they wish to have children, where they would like to live, and the lifestyle they want to enjoy. Through their conversations with older women, group members

who aspired to positions of responsibility in their work life were made aware of the extra obligations they may be expected to assume should they choose to have a family.

Mentoring, as a mutual relational process (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002), can help ease transitions to adulthood by providing support, facilitating access to information and networks, and providing interactions that allow for the transfer of knowledge and skills.

[M]entoring processes provide a form of cultural capital in helping young people to develop their own strategies for coping with their transitions to adulthood. At the same time these processes accord mentoring adults a form of “capital” in developing their own understanding of the realities of young people’s present day experiences that may not be available to them elsewhere. (Philip & Hendry, 2000, p. 213)

Rural counsellors are in key positions to actively solicit lists of available mentors.

The young women found narrative approaches—for example, recounting a personal case study—an excellent way to capture their possible future world. Counsellors could use the “narrative metaphor” to help young women think about their lives as stories and to work with them to experience their life stories in ways that are meaningful and positive. For instance, counsellors could encourage young women to create stories of action that result in achieved goals, such as obtaining a certificate. By taking personal actions, young women are more likely to develop interests, skills, attitudes, and life roles that could be useful in moving toward life-career goals and in contributing to their community in meaningful ways.

ADAPTATIONS AND EXTENSIONS

Group members’ experience of the workshop is a crucial factor in the development and implementation of further workshops. Co-construction of the workshop enhances contextual relevance and group members’ commitment to the process. Information about their experiences of the group process and the activities they found most useful would assist facilitators in developing appropriate approaches and exercises, taking into consideration local values and circumstances. Because this career workshop was implemented in only one rural community and with only young women, several research directions are possible. One course of action would be to deliver the workshop in a variety of settings to acquire information on the appropriateness of the activities for other populations and settings. Although this workshop was developed with and for rural girls, the content of the workshop may be appropriate or easily adapted for rural boys. Connection and social support may be as important to those boys who value and rely on cooperation and interdependence as a means of making the transition to adulthood. However, the literature is lacking in this area. Further exploration is needed to investigate the significance of community attachment and relationships in boys’ lives.

In summary, the experience of working together with young rural women to construct and deliver this workshop highlights the importance of working collaboratively and of providing developmentally appropriate experiences. A major challenge for rural female youth is making sense of career information that separates career from other life roles. The community-based approach to career counselling outlined in this article highlights the holistic, contextualized nature of many young rural women's life-career development. By employing a contextually based, relational approach, rural counsellors can deliver meaningful counselling services to this population that can promote their thriving across multiple dimensions of healthy development.

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