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Career Counselling with Primary Group Involvement

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During the past twenty years there has been a gradual shift from "occupational" counselling to "career" counselling. This shift has reflected an increasing awareness of the desirability of considering work as one part of a total life style (National Vocational Guidance Association, 1973). The recognition that psychological, sociological, economic and physical variables need to be considered when dealing with occupational choice has become pervasive.

One aspect of this broader perspective is the impact of the primary group upon the career decision making process. In referring to a "primary group" the following definition will be utilized:

The primary group is the basic unit of social organization — that group (or groups) most influencing the individual. Primary groups are described as intimate, continuing, personal associations on a face-to-face basis, determined by the degree of intimacy rather than proximity. Primary groups such as the family, couples or close friends strongly influence the individual's self concept and behavior. (Morrill, Oetting, & Hurst, 1979, p. 20)

The primary group obviously plays a significant role in terms of social influence. Current research indicates that the primary group is often regarded as a more important resource than either teachers or counsellors in career

decision making (Burkhardt, Orletsky, Hotchkiss, Lowry, Curry, & Campbell, 1977).

In view of the significance of a primary group it seems essential that information regarding the functioning of this group be gathered as part of the career counselling process. It is the purpose of this article to explore various ways of accomplishing this goal.

Strategy One: Perceptions of the Client

As a beginning step, the people who comprise the primary group need to be identified. This can be accomplished through questioning or by asking clients to respond to a task such as the following:

Using a blank sheet of paper, make a drawing of your present environment. Include in this diagram both the people and places that are important to you at the present time. Explain why you have included these particular people and places in your diagram.

In gathering this information the focus is always upon how clients perceive their particular situation.

Once the primary group has been identified, information regarding the specific impact of primary group members needs to be elicited. This can be accomplished by asking the following types of questions:

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1. (a) If your parents/spouse/friends were to describe you what would they say?
 (b) What would you think about these descriptions?
 (c) How does your own self description compare with the above?
2. (a) What advice have you received about life and your occupational choice?
 (b) Who has given you this advice?
 (c) What do you think about it?

Additional information can be obtained by using a sentence completion form which includes items such as: Others always say that I . . . , It's important that people see me as . . . , The people I've worked with . . . , My family . . . , Friends . . . , and so on.

By gathering this type of information issues can be identified which need to be resolved before clients can benefit from various types of occupational information. One typical example of this is the high school student who is torn between parental expectations and personal desires. The student may want to pursue a career in the arts, but feels pressure (implicit or explicit) to become a doctor or lawyer. Another situation may involve one member of a dual career family who is considering a job transfer which will affect the other partner.

In resolving these types of conflicts counsellors must first check to see that clients are in fact willing to discuss these areas further. This affirmation allows counsellors to engage in a more personal counselling direction. A second point concerns the counsellor skill level necessary to handle the desired intervention. Counsellors must be prepared to refer cases to the appropriate specialists in situations which seem to be developing beyond their skill level.

Of course, many cases will not develop into the conflict situations that are mentioned above. Under these circumstances the exploration serves mainly as a means of establishing a context for career decision making. It provides counsellors and clients with a basic overview of some of the variables which will influence career choice.

Strategy Two:

Perceptions of the Primary Group

Direct Involvement

One strategy for acquiring additional information about the primary group is to

simply invite them to a career counselling session in the early stages of the counselling process. This invitation would be made only after some preliminary discussion with and confirmation by the client. The client would be assured that although primary group members would be asked for their opinions, they would not be making the decisions. The information that would be generated in the session would serve only as one part of a preliminary assessment process.

In developing a structure for this type of interview the work of several family system therapists can be particularly helpful, i.e. Minuchin (1974), Haley (1976) and Madanes (1981). The interview, using this approach would proceed as follows:

1. The counsellor talks with everyone, making an attempt to establish some initial rapport.
2. There is an opening statement where the goals for the session are articulated.
3. Each person is asked in turn (starting with the primary group members) to provide their perspective on the career counselling problem. The initial request for information is usually quite vague, but after an initial statement it is appropriate to ask questions such as the following: (a) In your opinion, what do you think are the client's interests and abilities? (b) What changes have you noticed in the person over time? (c) What factors might cause some future problems? (d) Do you have any specific job suggestions? (e) In what ways might the career decision affect you?
4. The above discussion often provides a wealth of information. The dialogue, however, is typically channelled through the counsellor. It is appropriate at this point to deflect some of the statements by the group members in such a way that they begin to talk directly to one another. For example, a parent may claim that their child has the ability to attend college, but this is being denied by their son or daughter. Rather than continuing this discussion through the counsellor, they are encouraged to discuss it directly.
5. Towards the end of the interview the counsellor should summarize the discussion at an appropriate break point and discuss some of the options for future sessions. Some possibilities are: (a) standardized/non-standardized assessment; (b) further group

discussion; (c) additional individual counselling sessions; and in appropriate situations, (d) a referral to a family counsellor.

6. In developing a plan of action it is beneficial to ask the primary group members how they might assist the client in the future. The development of a concrete action plan often involves primary group members in a support role.

7. The action plan which is devised is usually in line with the original career counselling problem. A counsellor must be careful not to move into other areas (i.e. family therapy) without a clear mandate. In situations where there is open disagreement among primary group members, the action plan may include further discussions of the differences. It may not be possible to reach total agreement, but hopefully the discussions will result in increased tolerance.

By pursuing this direction counsellors will not only obtain information about the perceptions of primary groups, but also will have the opportunity to observe and evaluate group interaction. This additional firsthand data can play an important role in assisting clients with decision making and the development of career plans.

Indirect Involvement

Some of the information gathered through the direct interview approach can be obtained by having primary group members respond in written form to a series of questions. While this approach usually yields less information, it does have the advantage of ease of administration. Primary group members are usually more than willing to complete a questionnaire for career counselling purposes. As an illustration of this method, consider the following questionnaire:

Instructions:

In career decision making it is important that the individual be assessed from a number of viewpoints. The individual participates in a testing program as a means of obtaining an additional perspective. Other views which are equally important are the perceptions of family members or close friends. Your cooperation in providing this additional information is appreciated.

Questions:

1. In your opinion what do you think are the person's major interest areas?
2. What do you see as the person's strengths?
3. What do you see as his/her limitations?
4. How has the person changed over time and what changes would you anticipate in the future?
5. Do you have any specific career suggestions?
6. In what ways might the career decision affect you?

This questionnaire is completed by at least one primary group member and preferably by everyone directly involved.

The information gathered using this format can certainly be of some assistance in career planning. It gives the counsellor the opportunity to compare client perceptions with those of primary group members and facilitates additional discussion.

The questionnaire also often serves as a catalyst to encourage dialogue between the client and primary group members. It provides a focus for discussion and can lead to more direct communication, understanding and support.

Strategy Three: The Client and Primary Group Members Working Together

This final strategy directly incorporates primary group members in the career counselling process. Primary group members are asked not only to provide input in terms of their perceptions of the other, but also to help the client develop information getting strategies, evaluate occupational alternatives, explore educational/training options and establish systematic plans for the future. In this process, counsellors serve primarily as group organizers and consultants. A good example of this type of approach is the career guidance program for adolescents and their parents which has been recently developed by Cochran and Amundson (1983). In this program parents and students worked together to accomplish the above mentioned goals. A similar framework might also be appropriate for other types of groups, i.e. the dual career family, women returning to work, mid career change.

In utilizing this strategy one certainly has the advantage of maximizing direct involvement. The inclusion of the primary group members

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can work to facilitate more direct communication and encourage a more supportive atmosphere. It should be recognized, however, that this involvement can also seem overwhelming unless sufficient client autonomy is maintained throughout.

Discussion

The various strategies which have been outlined represent a number of options for understanding and working with primary group members in career counselling. I have developed these techniques during the past few years as part of my counselling and consultation practice.

The first set of strategies have assumed a very central role in my counselling approach. As standard procedure, I use drawings in the first interview with a sentence completion form and questionnaire being part of the homework assignment. I also include as part of the homework a questionnaire for primary group members (strategy two: indirect). With this broad based approach I am able to elicit considerable information in terms of the social situation and this is discussed in the second counselling session as part of the collaborative analysis. In this second session a decision regarding whether to invite primary group members to a counselling session is made (strategy two: direct). This step is usually employed in situations where the client feels supported by primary group members and values the opportunity to engage in joint planning.

The third strategy represents a very different approach to career counselling. In this sequence clients and primary group members work closely together and the counsellor adopts the role of consultant. As this requires a considerable investment of time and energy on the part of the primary group member(s) it is sometimes more difficult to implement. Nevertheless, it is a direction worth pursuing with those who are interested, particularly in times when there are cutbacks in counselling and a growing need for increased public awareness and support.

In order to be effective in gathering and interpreting information on the primary group it is important to have some theoretical framework as a foundation. To acquire the necessary knowledge in this area, career counsellors must be prepared to consider additional input. This does not mean that they must train as family therapists, it simply means that they

must acquire some basic understanding of family dynamics. With this preparation they will be able to offer a more comprehensive career counselling service.

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Analyzing Experiences using an Adaptation of a Heuristic Approach

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There are few who would deny that an analysis of experiences provides a suitable starting point for career exploration. In establishing the nature of experiences, two basic issues emerge. The first concerns which experiences to consider, while the second focuses on the depth and breadth essential for a meaningful analysis. This latter issue seems particularly important since a major shortcoming of many guidance approaches is the failure to achieve a sufficiently comprehensive career exploration (Dudley & Tiedeman, 1977; Super, 1974). In this paper we shall address the issue by showing how a structured interviewing approach can be applied in the systematic analysis of experience. This procedure has the advantage of not only developing a series of in-depth exploratory questions, but also tying these questions to a theoretical framework.

The Heuristic Approach

The basic ingredients of the heuristic approach were developed by Pike (1967) for