SOME VOCATIONAL COUNSELLING CONSTRUCT UNDERPINNINGS WITHIN THE "CHOICES" SYSTEM

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Abstract

The purpose of the presentation is to develop *some* of the vocational construct underpinnings within the "CHOICES" system. CHOICES, the author feels, could help make it possible for counsellors to prepare clients to explore an extensive computerized data file and to examine ways in which their personal criteria for selecting occupations, educational and training programs, influenced the range of opportunities available to them. By making choices immediately through reality testing in a low risk counselling environment the counsellor and client are provided with valuable data within a vocational counselling experience.

Résumé

Cet article veut développer certains des concepts fondamentaux relatifs au choix d'une carrière, concepts qui sont à la base d'un système de choix. Selon l'auteur, les choix aideraient les conseillers à préparer leurs clients à bien utiliser l'information disponible sur ordinateur et à examiner comment leurs critères personnels dans le choix d'une carrière et d'un programme de formation affectent la gamme d'ouvertures disponibles. Ces choix, lorsqu'ils s'effectuent dans un climat de confiance et de coopération, deviennent un outil précieux pour le conseiller et son client dans l'étude et le choix d'une profession.

There seems to be an increasing demand for innovative methods to facilitate vocational career development (Jarvis 1977, 1978; Super, 1970; Tolbert, 1974). Counsellors with this responsibility, are constantly searching for more effective ways of responding to this goal. The job of developing vocational guidance programs is not an easy one. It necessitates providing comprehensive programs for clients at various educational and work readiness levels and, quite often, this occurs with limited staff and resources (Hansen & Barrow, 1973). Now more than ever, however, it would seem that vocational planning needs to be done carefully and thoughtfully and with the help of as many resources as possible. The counsellor continually seems to be the strategic person who is in a position to respond to this important need (Kroll, 1974; Turgeon, 1977).

The CHOICES[1] system, an innovative method of facilitating vocational and career development, in the hands of a counsellor (i.e., as an educational tool for the counsellor) is seen by the author as a possible method of responding to this important need. The purpose of this article is to present some of the possible vocational counselling construct underpinnings implicit within the CHOICES system. These underpinnings are projections into the system by the author as a result of an extensive involvement within the pilot projects, during the developmental phase of CHOICES, and should be viewed by the reader as a beginning in the clarification of construct underpinnings within the system. A further study and continued elaboration of these constructs is essential to the long term development of the system. First, the author believes that it is important to attempt to answer four important preliminary questions: Why use a computer? Why was CHOICES developed within a framework of direct computer inquiry? What were the original objectives of the system? How can CHOICES help our clients?

A COMPUTER

Why use a computer in vocational counselling? This question has been discussed extensively in the literature (Cassell, Russell & Mehail, 1974; Harris, 1973a, 1973b; Jarvis, 1978; Stern, 1974; Super, 1970; Thal-Larsen & Parrish, 1975; Turgeon, 1978; Weinstein, 1969). It would seem that use of the computer has appeal for several reasons. Some of these are the computer's ability to: a) store in its memory banks and quickly retrieve vast quantities of information (this storage and retrieval can be of service to both counsellor and client); b) repeatedly, or as often as the counsellor and client desire relate numerous and distinct pieces of informa-

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1. "CHOICES" Computerized Heuristic Occupational Information and Career Exploration System Developed by the Occupation and Career Analysis Division of the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission.

tion, with consistency and accuracy; c) if programmed properly, the computer can stimulate a conversation with the client thus increasing the personalization of the transaction and assist in generating alternatives for the client and counsellor; and d) the counsellor and client determine the pace at which the computer reacts. The computer responds only to the information asked for by the client and counsellor and at a rate required by the counsellor and client. Having discussed the first question let us now proceed to the second: Why was CHOICES developed within a framework of direct computer inquiry?

A DIRECT INQUIRY METHOD

What characterizes this method is the system's ability to:

(a) Allow discussion with a computer program in a conversational manner because communication to and response from the computer is direct and immediate. In this application the intereaction for the counsellor and client can be much like having a conversation with an automated library.

(b) The client and counsellor can repeat the information retrieval process at will, changing sequence, priorities and values of input criteria. As the need surfaces in the vocational counselling relationship, this flexibility provides opportunities for immediate feedback.

(c) The client and counsellor have total control over the process of narrowing and expanding the ranges of alternatives. This further accentuates the flexibility inherent in the process.

(d) Both counsellor and client select from a variety of approaches within the system. This should further personalize the computer usage.

The third question can be stated as follows: What were the original objectives of the system?

ORIGINAL OBJECTIVES

In order that the system be as serviceable to both client and counsellor as possible and as cognizant in the onset as to the changing realities within the vocational counselling process, the original objectives for the system were specified as follows:

(a) Although the system is primarily designed for use in a counsellor-mediated role, it should be totally client-operable in so far as clients should be able to interact comfortably with the system, with "hands on" the terminal, and with minimal counsellor assistance.

(b) A client must be able to take away a printed record of the interchanges with the computer in order to have possible discussions with counsellor, family or friends, as well as receive details on occupational/educational data.

(c) The system must have an updating capacity in order that any new information or required changes to information on file can be dealt with immediately.

(d) Clients and counsellors should be able to choose only those criteria of relevance from the list of possible accessors. They should then be able to access by their chosen criteria any combinations and any sequences. Clients must have the opportunities to "change their minds" at will throughout the interaction with the computer. A consideration of the fourth preliminary question in our discussion seems in order at this time.

CURRENT OPERATIONAL COMPUTER SYSTEMS

In consideration of client response to computer systems, it would seem that clients learn to handle computerized systems quickly. In addition, they seem to need minimum supervision and assistance, and appear to have little or no fear of technology (Harris, 1973a, 1973b; Kroll, 1974; Turgeon, 1978; Jarvis, 1978; Casserly, 1977). The clients' natural anticipatory concerns quickly leave following the counsellor's orientating them to the system.

Computer assisted counselling systems can also be designed to effectively assist diverse populations of students with diverse needs, beginning as early as age twelve or thirteen (Casserly, 1977; Stern, 1974; Super, 1970). These students have come from varying levels of ability and achievement, within a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, with differing career and educational experience and with different vocational objectives (Stern, 1974; Super, 1970).

There is evidence that clients respond favourably to the systems, the majority indicating a greater ability to make career decisions, in that they have learned more about themselves and/or learned something new about occupations (Weinstein, 1969; Stern, 1974; Kroll, 1974; Jarvis, 1976; Casserly, 1977).

Clients view computerized systems as having seemingly personal qualities to the extent that the system remembers the clients' names, interests, abilities, and to a degree the search patterns they used in exploring the system (Harris, 1973a, 1973b; Turgeon, 1978; Jarvis, 1978). Moreover, clients view the computer's speed and competency in giving vast amounts of information related to their personal interests and its ability to help discover new possibilities as its greatest capabilities (Super, 1970; Turgeon, 1978; Jarvis, 1978). There are, in addition, indicators which suggest that the more personally involved the interaction is (in that the information can be stored and retrieved at will by the client) the more intensified and relevant the interface becomes (Casserly, 1977; Jarvis, 1976; Super, 1970; Thal-Larsen & Parrish, 1975; Turgeon, 1978).

It is interesting to note that when the systems have been used in schools there has been an increase in parent-student discussion of educational and occupational aspirations (Casserly, 1977; Turgeon, 1978). Parents, like their children, considered the computerized systems particularly useful in getting relevant information about occupations and seeing connections between their children's personal characteristics (e.g., interests and preferences) and occupational possibilities. Most parents felt that computerized systems should be available in the schools and that a greater emphasis should be placed on educational and vocational guidance in the schools (Casserly, 1977; Jarvis, 1978; Turgeon, 1978; Thal-Larsen & Parrish, 1975).

Counsellors' reactions to computerized systems are also interesting. Once counsellors are confortable with the system they would seem to be highly interested in using the information as a reality-testing base for their counsellees (Casserly, 1977; Jarvis, 1976, 1978; Turgeon, 1978). This seems to enable them to devote more time to vocational counselling in follow-up sessions with their clients. Counsellor mediation is essential for an effective interface and the need for in-service training programs preparing counsellors to use the system is vital (Casserly, 1977; Jarvis, 1976, 1978; Kroll, 1974; Super, 1970; Turgeon, 1978).

The author perceives several vocational construct underpinnings within the CHOICES system. As a result it is imperative that he discuss them.

The system begins with an underlying assumption: — the importance of the interactive effect of *client-counsellor-computer* (Figure 1).* Obviously it is also important to examine counsellor mediation in this interactive process (Jarvis, 1976, 1977, 1978; Turgeon, 1978).

The construct question therefore arises. In using CHOICES, how might we, as counsellors, assist our clients to choose more effectively when making vocational decisions?

HELPING OUR CLIENTS

As counsellors we should be able to help our clients equip themselves with accurate and relevant information concerning their individual readiness and state of vocational development. Our clients should be encouraged to formulate hypotheses about themselves as individuals and to know what important decision points are available to them at a particular moment in time and in their future.

In addition our clients should be encouraged to develop appropriate ways of testing out these

* *A concept arrived at in conversation with Gene Telka, a researcher for OCAD with the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission.*
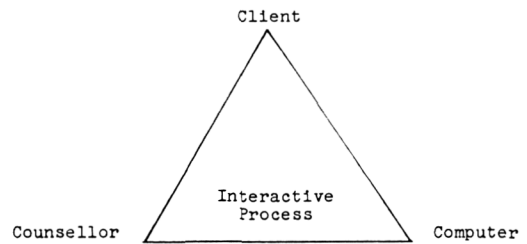

Figure 1. The Underlying Assumption in CHOICES

hypotheses against both past experiences and anticipated future experiences. Awareness and coming to terms with the educational and occupational relevance of what they know about themselves and what they will learn in the future is of importance.

We can help our clients see themselves through the process of acquiring the tools and knowledge which are necessary in understanding *themselves, the world of occupations* and *present educational decisions* both positively and constructively. This is indeed an essential consideration within the CHOICES interaction.

When using CHOICES the counsellor must be cognizant that the process by which clients develop vocational maturity varies among our individuals since people are at different stages of psychological and physical maturity (Super, 1964, 1957, 1970). Every client is unique in what he brings to the vocational counselling experience. This uniqueness coupled with an appropriate vocational counselling intervention help us understand the developmental reality within our clients and enables us to use this understanding in counselling. Noteworthy, also is the consideration that a method of determining vocational maturity within our clients is possible when observing the degree to which they as individuals: a) are oriented to the world of work; b) are able to seek and understand vocational information, c) are able to make decisions in light of this information, and d) are able to recognize the direction of this vocational preference. CHOICES, the author believes, helps this happen.

When using CHOICES, therefore, we as counsellors should be able to establish vocational behavioural objectives which are also logically normative for our clients at a given level of our clients' development. In addition, we must be aware that the utilization of this approach should not be inconsistent with the differential readiness of our clients, since the goal is to establish outcomes in our vocational counselling which can be varied and tailored to the individual.

In helping our *clients to become more* vocationally mature while using CHOICES, we, as counsellors, can adopt four behavioural objectives: a) assist our clients in arriving at a

greater knowledge of self; b) assist our clients in arriving at a clearer understanding of the world of work; c) assist our clients in developing vocational planning skills and in recognizing the varied resources which are available to them; and d) assist our clients in formulating, discussing, and evaluating their attitudes, values and motivation towards work. When considering the vocational construct issues inherent in CHOICES one must reflect upon the implicit structure for using the "CHOICES" system within the process dimension of vocational counselling (Figure 2).
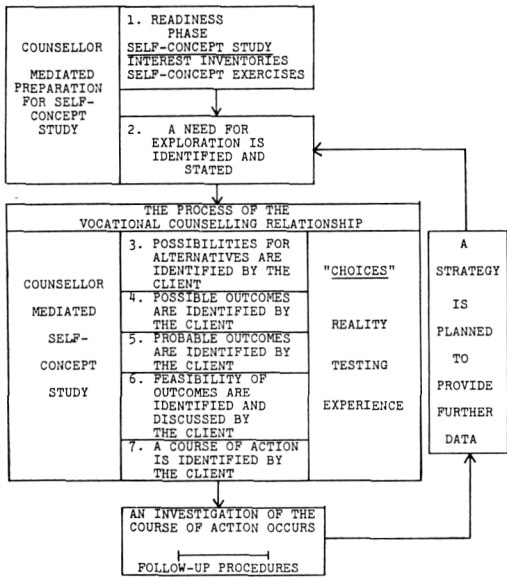

Figure 2. A Proposed Structure for Using the "CHOICES" System Within a Vocational Counselling Process.

Awareness of a *process dimension* within our clients' level of vocational development leading to vocational maturity is essential in approaching, using and following-up the system. The following process-framework is helpful in formulating a counselling intervention with our clients while using CHOICES. These should be viewed by counsellors as *indicators* and not *absolutes* of the process of vocational development.[2]

1. *The Readiness Phase* — This attitude is indicated within our clients and perceived by counsellors as motivation, readiness, and willingness to enter into the explorative stance. This readiness phase is a necessary prerequisite in the process of vocational development. It is a vital first step in the process.

2. *A Need for Exploration is Identified and Stated* — This is essential to exploration as it focuses on the *HOW TO* skills which permit the process to begin. These skills are directed towards both *SELF-CONCEPT* understanding and/or *OCCUPATIONAL* understanding.

3. *Possibilities for Alternatives are Identified by the Client* — Some understanding of intellectual and educational requirements: some understanding of personal interests, appropriate and possible outlets to these interests; some understanding of the alternatives available within these diverse outlets.

4. *Possible Outcomes are Identified by the Client* — Becoming aware of factors which may impede the implementation of a particular preference along with an ability to be able to generate and mobilize alternatives where and when necessary, as well as an awareness of the need to be able to differentiate one's values. This ability within our clients permits them to differentiate: the personality important from the personality unimportant; the relevant from the irrelevant when approaching a choice; the ability to concentrate on certain objectives and activities rather than on others as a basis for decision making and action.

5. *Probable Outcomes are Identified by the Client* — Being able to access where they are now in light of a future projection (e.g., understanding educational avenues and requirements since these provide access to different fields or levels of occupational activity).

6. *Feasibility of Outcomes are Identified and Discussed by the Client* — We should observe within our client, a readiness to begin formulating a general preference or a crystallization within an occupational projection. The preference level within our clients is general, more like a cluster than an actual job, out of which further specification occurs. This is followed by an awareness of the need to acquire more information on a preferred occupation. The client may desire more specific information about the generalized preference. This search is characterized by a desire for a greater degree of accuracy and variety of information. This leads to an intuitive awareness of the process of vocational decision making which clients have gone through as well as an ability to apply this awareness to ongoing situations. This is characterized by a generalized felt confidence in the "how to" process.

7. *A Course of Action is Identified by the Client* — A still greater refinement within our clients is a sharper focus on the particular vocational preference and an awareness of the steps preceding implementation. This step has a definite reality testing base, a course of action on the part of the client. In other words, reality testing in a

2. Adapted from Super, Donald E. A developmental approach to vocational guidance; recent theory and results. *Vocational Guidance Quarterly.* 1964, *13* (1), 1-10.

low-risk environment which CHOICES provides, the client should eventually be ready to test out this model of self with the real world of occupations. Herein lies, in the author's mind, the most valuable usage of CHOICES within vocational counselling: reality testing for the client in a low-risk environment.

For as Frankl (1952) challenges, "Man ultimately decides for himself! And in the end education must be education towards that ability to decide" (p. 17).

CONCLUSION

As counsellors, we recognize that effective vocational decision making requires a high degree of self-knowledge and a means of relating this self-knowledge to an individual's range of vocational opportunities. Our clients ponder such questions as:

"What type of person am I?"

"What can I do well?"

"What do I enjoy doing?"

"What am I looking for in a career?"

"What preparation will I require?"

"How can I find out what is available in the world of work which satisfies my own personal profile of interests, aptitudes, preferences, values and educational aspirations?"

A satisfactory manner of arriving at an answer to this last question becomes the crux of effective vocational counselling. Implied is the existence of a bank of information on the world of work and a system for extracting only that information which is related to an individual's personal profile at a particular stage of development.

CHOICES, the author feels, could make it possible for counsellors to prepare clients for the range of opportunities availabe to them by exploring an extensive computerized data file, and by examining their personal criteria for selecting occupations and educational or training programs. Communication is direct with the computer through a typewriter-like terminal. Following a series of simple instructions, the client types on the terminal which produces an immediate response from the computer. This should allow the client to see instanteously the results of choices and decisions made. *The immediate reality testing in a low risk counselling environment would* provide the counsellor and client with valuable information to discuss within the vocational counselling process. Furthermore, for the counsellor faced with the immense ongoing challenge of an up-to-date vocational information library, CHOICES could provide a far broader range of possibilities to consider in its computer data files than would otherwise be practicable for the client. Coupled with an effective counselling

framework it is felt by the author that CHOICES, as a tool in the repetoire of counsellors, could help bridge the gap between the clients' needs to explore and to understand himself/herself more fully, and to relate this understanding to the world of work.

A LAST WORD

The purpose of this presentation was to develop some of the vocational counselling construct underpinnings within the CHOICES system. In so doing, questions were posed, and answers to these questions were attempted. Finally, the CHOICES system, the author believes, is an innovative method of facilitating vocational and career development. As a tool, within a counsellor-mediated relationship, it is believed to have genuine possibilities in assisting our clients to make more mature and more responsible vocational and educational decisions.

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