

Canadian Counsellor
 Conseiller Canadien
 1982, Vol. 16, No. 4, 225-230

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS RELATIVE TO MID-LIFE CAREER COUNSELLING*

WILLIAM M. TALLEY
McGill University

Abstract

Some of our ideas that have been derived from traditional psychology courses may block our thinking when it comes to mid-life career change. More recent developments in adult psychology and current research in adult education about cognitive development and learning styles of adults should give us a different perspective in this area. There are some approaches other than psychological testing, job information, and retraining that may facilitate a career change at mid-life. This article is an attempt to clarify some of our thinking about learning ability in adulthood, role change at various times of life, and attitudinal change. Finally, a number of probing questions are presented with the intention of helping individuals assess their readiness for changing a career at mid-life.

Résumé

Certaines idées contractées à l'occasion des cours de psychologie traditionnelle sont de nature à interférer avec notre compréhension des changements de carrière survenant au mi-temps de la vie. Les récentes avances de la psychologie des adultes et la recherche en cours sur l'éducation du développement cognitif et des styles d'apprentissage chez l'adulte dessinent une nouvelle perspective dans ce domaine. Hormis la psychométrie, l'information professionnelle et le recyclage, il existe quelques approches susceptibles de faciliter le changement de carrière au mi-temps de la vie. Cet article constitue une tentative de clarification de notre façon de comprendre la capacité d'apprendre chez l'adulte, le changement de rôles à diverses étapes de la vie ainsi que le changement d'attitudes. Enfin, l'auteur soulève quelques questions de nature exploratoire avec l'intention d'aider les individus à évaluer leur disposition à changer de carrière au mi-temps de leur vie.

Introduction

Changing a career¹ in mid-life involves more than changing the kind of work one does. Work — because it occupies so much of one's time and has such a significant place in Western Society — is also a determiner of one's life

*An address delivered at the National Institute for Personnel Research, Johannesburg, South Africa, October 16, 1981.

Requests for reprints should be sent to William M. Talley, Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling, McGill University, 3700 McTavish, Montréal, Qué., H3A 1Y2

¹The word "career" will be used to cover a number of terms such as work, job, profession, and vocation.

style, what one's address is, who one's friends are, how much vacation one gets, and so on and on. In essence, a career defines and sets many of the parameters for the quality of one's life and the opportunities and limitations for a chance at affluence, education, and culture.

Counselling the mid-life person, who is seeking a career change or advancement potential, becomes more than counselling from a vocational perspective. In reality it constitutes counselling for mid-life "life change".

If we accept the viewpoint of develop-

mental psychologists, adolescents and young adults are in the process of identity resolution. This identity process includes, among other things, the role one plays in society in regard to productivity, working, and making a living. Actually, adolescent psychology (developmental) emphasizes that this identity resolution is necessary for healthy development throughout the rest of adulthood. Erikson (1959, 1963) emphasizes, in his psychosocial stages of development, that this is to a great extent, the major resolution of adolescence and young adulthood. In a sense, then, when the adult in mid-life begins re-arranging significant factors in life that provide identity, he is generating, in some measure, the elements of a second identity crisis. Perhaps a healthy resolution in adolescence and young adulthood facilitates an easier one in mid-life; yet career change at mid-life may precipitate, in any event, a renewal of the identity crisis.

Mid-life career change appears to have similar components in many ways for both men and women, even though the factors may be manifested in different ways. The 33-year old male who decides that being an accountant with a highly respected firm will never get him any place without further training finds that he must go back to school if he is ever going to advance in either a related or unrelated field. At school, he is once again in the role of a student; he may find himself older than most of the other students (or even the instructor). Life's schedule has to be re-arranged to accommodate studying and attending classes. Several new aspects of identity emerge, because he must meet certain role duties not demanded previously.

The 35-year old woman who quit school at 18 finds herself in a similar situation when she determines to enter school once again. Or the woman who quit work to bear and rear a child (or children) finds a new identity emerging as she goes back to her previous career. In both situations the woman finds a new identity (or, perhaps, self-image) emerging — that of student or “older apprentice”. When she rearranges her schedule and life style it has an impact on other family members as well, and sets off feelings or reactions that might not otherwise have come to the surface. The role of mother and housewife may be blurred by other identities.

Erikson's theory relating to identity crisis has been modified by Marcia (Muus, 1975) to include several variations, one of these being a psychosocial moratorium.

Eisenstadt (1962) has defined this period of role moratorium as “a period in which one may play with various roles without definitely choosing any.” Social change, increasing length of life-span, and rapid changes in career qualifications may have placed all of us in the position of being in somewhat of a psychosocial moratorium in regard to career status, and we can no longer think in terms of career identity being fixed. Career identity becomes a fluid state throughout adulthood.

Attitude Change Parallels Aging and Work Experience

When we administer instruments such as the Strong-Campbell, Super's Work Values Inventory, Holland's Self-Directed Search, and the Kuder, we accept that a person's interests, and the attitudes accompanying those interests, shape an individual's choice of a career or demonstrate that these individuals resemble people already in certain careers in terms of interests. This is a plausible assumption. A person must have certain interests to make him/her suitable for entering the training for a certain career. Yet we cannot deny that interests are closely linked with attitudes and values.

Is it not true as well that the attitudes and interests of an individual are greatly shaped by the career one chooses? To give an example of this interaction, let us suppose that you have a dinner party at your home and invite individuals from the business (industry) sector, the academic field (preferably some field besides science), and advanced technology. Develop a discussion on some current topic and observe the clustering of ideas, some of which reflect the influence of career on attitudes of the guests. Of course, who can say, which came first — attitudes shaped by career or career shaped by attitude — but it certainly is noticeable that one's career does have a relation to attitudes, values, and interests in many direct and indirect ways, and who is to say that one's career doesn't have an impact on values, interests, and attitudes? Kelman (1974) says, “Attitudes develop out of the person's interaction with an object in a particular motivational and cognitive context” (p. 316). So, interacting with a career and all its aspects, very likely develops our attitudes in ways we may not realize.

Other parallels to traditional psychology are the concept of latency periods and critical periods of learning or development. It is important to acknowledge that women who

Mid-Life Career Counselling

have been rearing a family and return to the work force or to school have not been mentally dormant, as some might have us believe. Perhaps it is preferable to think of this time as an internal growth period (like Freud's latency period?) when much is developing at a quiet, deep level. Thus, the woman of 35 or 40 returning to the world of work or to school has developed some attitudes, interests, and/or perceptions that are not swept away swiftly, and moreover, they may be significant in terms of the contributions she can make in a given field. Perhaps these years of experience have placed her in a position of critical learning ability. Basically, then, the mid-life adult finds his/her perceptions of the world, and his/her attitudes and values being challenged as he/she sets about to make a change. Attitudinal change is not accomplished overnight and the person in mid-life who starts an expansion, change, or modification of career may find the new job not only a challenge of ability but a challenge of personal ego strength as well. No doubt a large number of adults can, with minimal ease, move into new job situations, but those persons who have financial, intellectual, and emotional demands placed on them along with the change, may find the challenge painful and anxiety provoking.

To summarize then, mid-life career change may precipitate a renewal of the identity crisis in terms of career role expectations and there may be a challenge to one's values, interests, and attitudes. Moreover, periods in life remote from the active work force may sharpen perceptions and set the stage for studying once again.

Mid-Life Career Change May Become a Cognitive or Intellectual Challenge

Women who return to school after rearing a family, or men who find themselves moving into a more challenging career in their late 30s or 40s, or persons of either sex who change careers in adulthood frequently express the fear that they will not be as able to learn and grasp new ideas as they were in their teens or 20s. In some ways this is realistic, but in most ways it is fallacious thinking. We are not challenging vigorously enough earlier claims regarding the difficulty of learning later in life.

In the light of more recent thought on this subject, it appears that some of our cognitive abilities may not mature until later in life. Intelligence, learning, cognition – these are constructs that describe a cluster of traits or

abilities. Different abilities may mature or decline at different ages – or one ability may build on another ability's maturity.

Piaget (cf. Muus, 1975) demonstrated how cognitive abilities develop and build in a sequential fashion, but his research and theory should not be misused to attempt an explanation of how people learn at the adult level. The thrust of his theory deals with the process of cognitive development in childhood, not differential learning ability at later ages. So, when the stages of his theory taper off after adolescence, we must not misinterpret this as an indication that the ability to learn later in life slows down in every way, or declines, or that intellectual development ceases.

Newer approaches to adult education stress the differences between *how* adults learn rather than *why* adults *can or cannot* learn new things as rapidly as when they were in their teens. In adult education there is more emphasis on accumulated knowledge, maturation of thought processes, utilization of earlier basic learning, relationship of old and new learnings, and reading at one's own pace. Learning styles are examined (Knowles, 1973).

Festinger (1957) postulated a number of theoretical concepts about cognitive dissonance, a condition in which an individual has difficulty resolving the relationship between two conflicting ideas and feelings. Individuals in mid-life demonstrate a need to resolve cognitive dissonance in learning situations. This resolution of dissonance is often misinterpreted as rigidity of thought, closed-mindedness, or set thinking. What one often observes is that the adult learning a new skill, or whatever, takes some time to fit the new ideas into the framework of older learning – and when this is then accomplished a period of rapid integration takes place.

Persons in mid-life career training need to be taught from the perspective of adult learning theory and cognitive processing. Physiological and emotional factors obviously play a role in speed of adult learning, but it does not seem fair to assume they have any greater effect at mid-life than in adolescence or young adulthood. Visual problems, manual dexterity, and reaction time affect learning at any age.

Facilitating Mid-Life Career Change

A change of career at mid-life demands much consideration and planning. The individ-

ual making this change must do battle with his own previous attitudes generated by traditional thinking as well as others who have misapplied conventional teaching in psychology.

There are the obvious approaches, such as vocational testing, job information, and re-training programs but these are more in the realm of data gathering and information appraisal than getting at the heart of the matter. There are other external factors to be put into operation as a means of facilitating this process. These are

1. First of all, industry, business, academic institutions, and other sectors of the work force need to develop more programs (economic, counselling, and instructional) to assist their employees to make the choice to enter related areas, upgrade their career skills, or provide financial assistance for a set period to cover the time employees must use to move to another career or a related one. Or, on the other hand, devise a system to identify reasons for job dissatisfaction and make concrete attempts to rectify them so the employee will stay.

Many Canadian and U.S. companies now are developing "Employee Assistance Programs" to help employees with alcohol, drug, medical, legal, financial, and marital problems (Wrich, 1974). Some of these industries and companies are also providing assistance for vocational and career counselling.

2. Community mental health agencies or social service centres, manpower centres, and government welfare agencies need to broaden their scope in terms of the types of seminars and workshops they can offer individuals of all socio-economic levels who are seeking a career change. In the past, these agencies have focussed a great deal on job hunting skills, testing, interviewing techniques, and other aspects of job hunting. Now that individuals from all levels of society are faced with career changes and retraining commitments, these agencies should expand to include seminars and workshops that go beyond basic job hunting skills.

3. Planned government financial assistance is needed. Perhaps the major inhibitor of career change is financial concern. By the time an individual has reached the late 30s, 40s, or 50s, a certain lifestyle has developed, certain economic commitments have been made, and security plans for the future have been set up

and these are matters of concern. To suddenly sever one's source of income could be disastrous. Some type of government assistance, in terms of grants, loans, or awards, could be a major incentive for choosing and making a needed change. Certainly this would be expensive and specific criteria would have to be determined to prevent abuses, but in the long run, in all probability, it would pay for itself. We are aware of what often happens to individuals whose job satisfaction or security is low or to those who lose a job with none to take its place. Frequently, the result is alcoholism, medical problems, marital problems, and psychological problems, many of which eventually result in the use of services paid for by the taxpayer's money. A system of cooperation between industry, academia, and other sectors, that gives two or three years' severance pay and governmental financial assistance would enhance one's feeling of freedom of choice to explore a new career in mid-life. Perhaps some type of insurance could be developed by industry or business. Flexibility of transference of retirement funds would ease some anxiety.

Working for the Future

The problems in the world of work for the mid-life individual will not disappear in the coming two or three decades; indeed, these conditions are more than likely to increase. For those of us already in mid-life we may choose to "weather the storm", but, if we have any feeling for our youth (a species survival instinct?), it is mandatory that we revise our thinking in a number of areas and set in motion educational and informational services that reflect new thinking and which will educate our youth to deal effectively with these issues when they reach their 30s, 40s, 50s. These include:

1. Better statistical information on labor needs for the future; predictive data on technological change and its impact on the labor force; statistics on demographic changes; professional assessments of the impact of political and economic changes; and designation of some governmental body to assume responsibility for informing the public on labor changes or predictions of change.

2. More early school education programs; career education courses that inform students on the nature of certain vocations, professions, or technological and academic careers; earlier identification of interests and differential abilities; and instruction in job search skills

Mid-Life Career Counselling

and content of jobs. For example, the Quebec Ministry of Education has set up in its new *Régime Pédagogique*, a requirement of two units of credit per year in career education and social and personal development (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 1980).

3. More public information, by way of television, radio, and newspaper, on changes in career opportunities and possibilities open to individuals who qualify and educational TV programs that replace glorified or condescending stereotypes of certain professions or careers.

4. Flexibility of school programs so that students don't become "locked into" a certain direction of study too early and continue to persist because they will lose too much if they make a change. Perhaps an approach to education could be that practiced in Biblical times that each individual who studies a profession learns a trade as well, or a parallel skill along with technological training. This would provide the individual some means of earning an income while making a career change.

5. More research on professional (or career) "burn-out" and job dissatisfaction in order to determine means of preventing "burn out" and to identify factors in job dissatisfaction that might be remedied without changing careers completely. Professional "burn-out" has become a topic of current interest in North America, but we still need to know more about preventing and remedying it.

Assuming Personal Responsibility

In the long run it will not matter how many programs are instituted or how many financial incentives are offered to facilitate career change if the individual does not personally take the initiative. Every professional counsellor knows that the "bottom line" of decision-making rests with the individual and his/her willingness to assume responsibility for it. There are some questions anyone at mid-life should explore if a decision for career change is imminent. Confrontation with the reality of career change takes a great deal of personal strength and a tenacious spirit.

These questions may be used to help a client determine if he or she has given sufficient thought to the change.

Are you a risk taker? Some people can

deal with the ambiguities of risk taking better than others. All possible risks can never be predicted before any event, but some are obvious. Thought and planning should be done as to how you will deal with these risks.

Have you determined whether your skills are outmoded? The question may actually be whether you have overlooked improving your skills rather than being in a career that is unsatisfying or unproductive. For example, a secretary who can use only a manual typewriter might find it awkward to keep pace in a modern office. In this case what may be needed is an upgrading of skills rather than a change of career completely. In addition, you may have closed your mind to possible variations of your career that could be experienced if you simply acquired more expertise in a particular requirement of your present career.

How much initiative are you willing to take to make a change? Moaning can become a substitute for changing – and to change requires initiative to search out possibilities. It can be observed that some individuals who are in the process of mid-life career change engage in restricted thinking. An example comes to mind of a 35-year old woman who found her work as a psychologist unsatisfying and her search for opportunities in related fields unattractive. Finally, she took the risk of looking into opportunities with a large financial institution and found an offer for a very satisfying position. She later expressed the fact that she would not have taken the initiative to investigate something so removed from her original career if she had not felt a great deal of external pressure. It would be to our advantage to take such initiative before feeling pressured.

How well have you organized your personal responsibilities and obligations? It is impossible to predict and arrange all life's affairs so as to provide perfect conditions for a career change, but it seems only reasonable that anyone contemplating such a change should attend to financial obligations, discuss the matter with family members or others whom it will directly affect, project some of the lifestyle changes that will be made, and assess the nature and range of physical, intellectual, and emotional demands that will be experienced. It was long ago stated in the Bible, "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" (RSV, Luke 14:28). Planning should be a

natural prelude to change and the organization of affairs seems to be an index of the measure of thought given it.

To what extent have you looked at the ramifications of a career change and whether or not "revision" is better than change? There should be considerable thought given to whether the difficulties with a current career will be rectified by a change. Change may not be appropriate for a number of reasons, because the dissatisfaction with the career may stem from conditions external to it. For example, the person suffering depression, poor physical health, unusual concerns over social status, or poor financial planning may be projecting on to the career personal matters that have little or nothing to do with the career itself. However, if a change is beneficial in terms of personal advancement or to keep pace with economic and social changes, one should assess the ramifications of a total change as opposed to a "revision" of one's present career. A "revision" may be an upgrading of skills, branching out into a related area, entering into one's own business, or modifying the present duties of the career. A complete change of career may be the practical choice for some; for others it may be unwarranted.

How many possibilities have you explored before making a particular choice of a career change? True options for career change can only be exercised if the individual is well informed about what is available and the necessary requirements for taking advantage of them. In addition to exploring the nature of a different career and the requirements for moving into it, a great deal of consideration must be made for chances of employment, hidden costs in getting started, usual length of time needed to become "established", and conditions related to the new work setting.

To what extent have you engaged in serious self-examination? Possibly the first step in deciding on a career change is self-examination in terms of motivation and openness to change. Change of a large dimension of life requires patience, tolerance for ambiguity, perceptual flexibility, and adjustment to new ideas. Serious checking on these dimensions of life may alter one's views as to the feasibility of initiating a career change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, we are looking at a situation in which we not only have to

organize our resources to do battle with external realities in mid-life career change, but one in which we must resist thinking that may have been molded by traditional psychology or distortions of psychological studies of human behavior.

It is evident that, in order to deal with the external realities of a mid-life career change, certain concrete actions must be taken. To assure that our youth, in the future, do not have to fight the same battles we are experiencing, we need to initiate education programs of career education early in life.

Finally, the major obstacle to career change may be the person himself/herself. The individual must take personal responsibility to make an assessment of ways in which a change may affect him/her, and to look at the implications of it.

References

- Eisenstadt, S.N. Archetypal patterns of youth. *Daedalus*, 91: 28-46, 1962.
- Erikson, E.H. Identity and the life cycle. *Psychological Issues*, 1959, 1(1), 50-100, 110-121.
- Erikson, E.H. *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton, 1963.
- Festinger, L. *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1957.
- Kelman, H.C. Attitudes are alive and well and gainfully employed in the sphere of action. *American Psychologist*, May, 1974, 29(5), 310-324.
- Revised Standard Version, *Holy Bible*, Luke 14:28.
- Knowles, M.S. *The adult learner: A neglected species*. Houston, Tex.: Gulf Pub., 1973.
- Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, *Régime Pédagogique*, 1980.
- Muus, R.E. *Theories of adolescence*, (3rd ed.), New York: Random House, 1975.
- Wrich, J.T. *The employee assistance program*. Center City, Minn.: Hazelden, 1974.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Martin Talley received his Ph.D. from Ohio State University and has been at McGill University since 1968. He is currently an associate professor and program director of counselling in the Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling and is interested in mid-life development and counselling strategies for middle-aged and older adults.