

Title: Home Away from Home: some clues to address the career counseling needs of immigrants.

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Home Away from Home: some clues to address the career counseling needs of immigrants.

Current conceptions of cross cultural counselling psychology emphasise the importance of understanding how socio-cultural backgrounds influence the phenomenological perspectives of racial minorities living in western countries (e.g. Fouad and Bingham, 1995). This paper is based on the authors' observations of career development behaviour in India. The information presented could have relevance to careers researchers and practitioners who work in multicultural contexts and are interested in developing a deeper understanding of how cultural and socio-economic factors prevailing in immigrants' countries of origin could continue to have an influence on their career development.

Career beliefs and career choices

One of our most consistent observations over twelve years of working with Indian young people and their families on issues of career development is that social cognitions in the form of beliefs, attitudes and mind sets could strongly influence the career preparation process. The influence of career beliefs on career development has been discussed by a number of investigators (e.g. Dorn and Welch 1985; Borders and Archadel, 1987; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Krumboltz and Worthington, 1999). Two important theoretical frameworks have emerged, namely, the Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (Krumblotz et al) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al). In summary the findings from these studies seem to indicate that social cognitive variables in the form of strongly held beliefs about self, career preparation and the world of work, combine with socio-economic status (SES) to influence the career decision making process. We present our observations using these streams of thought as our frame of reference.

The Indian context

Research into career development behaviour is in its infancy in India and information about the relationship between socio-economic status and career belief patterns in India are not easily available. However a review of Indian research indicates that specific belief themes seem to differentiate between the lower and higher SES groups. Investigations into *attributional styles* in the Indian context for example, have revealed that when compared to higher SES groups, lower SES young people tend to assume greater responsibility for failure and attribute their success experiences to some external cause (Misra & Misra, 1986). Examinations of young people's *orientations to the future* have indicated that the higher SES groups have a long term view with a strong motivation to plan for the future. Lower SES groups on the other hand seem to be more oriented to the here and now (Misra & Jain, 1988; Chandra, 1997). Comparative studies of *occupational aspirations* have indicated that they tend to follow a hierarchical order corresponding to the SES levels of the subjects (Jhaj & Grewal, 1976). Studies of *self-worth* among low SES working children and school drop-outs have revealed ideas of failure and a fatalistic acceptance of their situation (Ojha, 1996).

Indications such as these from the Indian literature raise the possibility that social cognitions could influence the career decision making process and that these cognitions could be markedly different across SES groups.

Socio-economic Status and Career Beliefs

Our experiences with Indian samples of high school students (age 15 to 16 years) indicate that characteristic differences could exist between the career beliefs of higher and lower socio-

economic status groups across belief themes. We now report our observations with reference to three specific career belief themes and the possible impact these beliefs could have on career planning.

Proficiency Beliefs

We define these cognitions as beliefs about the importance of acquiring qualifications and skills and acquiring personal proficiency for an occupation before entering the world of work. Our observations indicate that the lower SES groups tend to place a lower emphasis on acquiring work skills proficiencies. This could be the result of the high degree of pressure on lower SES groups to begin earning for survival at the earliest. Conversely, the higher SES groups tend to place a higher value on acquiring skills that would enhance their proficiency for an occupation. It is possible as a result, that the career planning of the higher SES groups could be characterised by a willingness to commit time and resource for acquiring proficiencies for suitable employment. Typically middle and higher SES families in India are prepared for long-duration college education for their children. On the other hand, the lower SES groups could be at risk to enter the world of work as unskilled labourers. Another observation particularly about the career planning of middle and higher SES groups in India once again highlights the interactions between career beliefs and career planning. Acquiring a college degree is attributed with a high level of prestige in the Indian context. However while college degrees in India improve the student's knowledge base, they do not usually enhance his or her work skills (e.g. Desai and Whiteside, 2000). Therefore while Indian families from higher SES levels could be willing to commit a significant amount of resource toward the career development of their children they could also show a characteristic confusion between preparing for the world of work with pertinent skills and merely acquiring degrees and qualifications.

Control and Self-Direction Beliefs

These are beliefs about control over life situations and to directing one's life. Our observations pointed to the possibility that the lower SES groups viewed the future in terms of the deprivations experienced in their present situation and demonstrated a lower orientation to exercising control over the trajectory of their lives. As a result, exerting time and effort toward planning for a career that might be actualised sometime in the future may not be a felt need for lower SES groups. The higher SES groups on the other hand showed a stronger orientation to creating opportunities for themselves. It is possible therefore that the higher SES groups would value counselling and guidance services and would be more likely than the lower SES groups to seek such services for career planning.

Persistence Beliefs

These are beliefs that support persistence toward career goals despite difficulties and barriers that could emerge during the process of career preparation. Our observations indicated that the persistence toward career goals is lower and less consistent among lower SES groups. As a result young people from lower SES families could be more predisposed to sacrifice long term gains for more immediate gains in the here and now. The higher SES groups on the other hand demonstrate a higher degree of persistence. We have noted (e.g. Arulmani, van Laar, & Easton, 2001), that when a middle SES family suffers economic difficulties, children's schooling is one of the last expenditures to be cut down. The family may move the child to a less expensive school, but would exert strenuous efforts to ensure that the child continues to go to school. On the other hand schooling would be one of the first compromises to be made by a lower SES family that faces barriers and difficulties.

Not discussed in this paper but of equal significance are a variety of other influences on beliefs that influence career planning in India. Some examples are caste, belief in metaphysical forces and fate, family structure (joint vs. nuclear family), family occupation and the gender of the career chooser.

The information presented above from the Indian context indicates that career beliefs could influence the career preparation process and that these beliefs could vary across SES groups within the same country. Identifying belief patterns and cognitive structures that underlie the career planning process could be of vital importance to developing effective and relevant interventions.

Careers Beliefs: differences across cultural groups:

Careers researchers around the world have begun to recognise that career beliefs could vary not only across socio-economic groups, but also across cultural groups. A brief overview of studies that have compared Asian and European-American orientations to career planning is presented here.

One important difference that has been noted is that Asians tend to have a stronger family and community orientation, with a preference for cooperative decision making. In contrast European-American orientations have been described to tend more toward individualism and competition (e.g. Watts, 1996).

A second difference is the narrowing of career choices by Asian groups to a selected group of occupational categories. For example, career preferences in India tend to be restricted by beliefs

about the ‘value’ of a career. As a result certain careers are perceived as ‘good’ careers (e.g. Akhilesh, 1991; Arulmani, van Laar & Easton, 2001). American research has also found that Asian Americans are relatively more restricted in their approach to career choice and tend to pursue a limited range of occupations (e.g. Tang, Fouad and Smith, 1999).

Beliefs about prestige and respectability play a powerful role amongst middle and higher SES families in India (e.g. Desai and Whiteside, 2000). Studies in the United Kingdom (e.g. Lightbody, Nicholson, Siann and Walsh, 1997) also found beliefs about the respectability of a career to have a stronger influence on Asian career choosers than those of British origin.

Reports such as these point to the possibility that social cognitions in the form of mind sets, attitudes and beliefs prevailing at ‘home’ could continue to influence immigrants’ career development behaviour even as they attempt to build their lives in their adopted countries.

Implications for practice

The information presented above could have important implications for a more effective practice of careers guidance and counselling in the Indian ethos as well as in multicultural contexts. Some of these implications are now discussed.

Role of the community

The Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making underlines the possibility that cognitions and beliefs emerging from socio-economic and cultural sources influence skill development, interpretations of self-observations and world-view generalisations (Krumboltz, 1979; Krumboltz & Nichols, 1990). The community plays a forceful role in the life of the individual in many

Eastern and Third World cultures. Indian child rearing practices, family structure, hierarchical social organisation and value systems promote interdependence, and independent decision making may not be directly nurtured in the Indian child (Sinha, 1979). Furthermore, Lewis and Gilhousen (1981) suggest that career myths are passed from one generation to the next and give rise to career decision making behaviours that are based on a structure of strongly held beliefs validated by the community. These observations are of particular relevance to career psychologists and counsellors working in multicultural contexts. It is essential that counsellors are sensitive to the role that the community and the family could play in the career decision making process of a young person. In such situations, including the family and the community in the career counselling process may have a more effective outcome than focussing on the individual alone.

The importance of addressing social cognitions

The literature has consistently indicated that existing careers interventions may not be altogether relevant to the needs of racial and ethnic minorities (e.g. Chartrand & Rose, 1996; Fouad & Bingham, 1995). It is critical that both researchers and practitioners note that strongly held beliefs (particularly when they could extend to an entire community) could play a significant role in constraining or facilitating the expression of an aptitude or the realisation of an interest (Naylor & Krumboltz, 1994). Careers interventions that focus on the more 'traditional' techniques such as aptitude testing and interest analysis may not address the felt needs of these client groups. The impact of careers guidance may be maximised when techniques that address underlying cognitions about career development are incorporated into the counselling process.

Counsellor Training

One of the most important implications for practice arising from this paper is the need for the development of counselling techniques and for training counsellors in skills that take into account the social cognitive factors influencing the career planning behaviour of specific client groups in multi cultural contexts. Some suggestions are discussed below that illustrate themes for counsellor skills training inputs.

Counsellor training could include inputs that develop skills for *incorporating the family / community* into the career counselling interaction. Skills to work with the leader of the community within the context of the counselling needs of the community for example, could go a long way in enhancing the effectiveness of the counselling interaction.

Skills to *elicit and address career beliefs* is an example of another counsellor training input. Facilitating the development of insight into the impact of career beliefs on career planning, addressing conflicts between family / community and the individual's career beliefs or conflicts between the client's career beliefs and the social cognitions common within the society that he or she is now a part of, are further examples of counselling targets that could be relevant in a multicultural context.

Need for further research

The information presented in this paper raises important questions about models for counselling that could have optimal relevance for different groups within multicultural societies. The findings presented suggest that investigations into social cognitive variables such as career beliefs

could play an important role in informing the practice of career guidance. A wider study comprising matched samples across countries, could throw valuable light on the impact of career beliefs across socio-economic status and cultural groups. Investigations contributing to the development of counselling techniques that address the felt needs of client groups within multicultural contexts could be a further target for future research.

In a world where cultural diversity is becoming more the norm than the rarity, approaches to career counselling that take these factors into account could be important both to practitioners and researchers who could increasingly encounter client groups differing from them in culture, ethnic background and socio-economic status.

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