

Enough for my mealie-meal:

The cultural preparedness approach to the delivery of careers services.

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Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, readers should be able to do the following:

1. Articulate the meaning of cultural preparedness and social-cognitive environment and the relevance of these concepts to career counselling.
2. Explain the different types of career beliefs described in this chapter and articulate their relevance to their local situations.
3. Demonstrate the ability to implement the Career Beliefs Diary to help a career chooser record thoughts he or she experiences in relation to career planning tasks, the emotions that emerge in response to these thoughts and the possible outcomes of these thoughts and emotions.
4. Demonstrate the ability to implement the Vignette Technique to develop a set of vignettes that could be used in small group discussions to promote greater sensitivity to how career beliefs can influence career development.

Introduction

A few years ago, I was travelling from Johannesburg to Pretoria, by taxi. The driver was a bright young man and I struck up a dialogue with him. The conversation drifted toward plans for the future, job and career. What he said to me was striking. “My life is fine,” he said. “I drive this taxi and when I have enough cash for my mealie-meal, I just stop for the day!” As career counsellors we speak of helping the individual discover personal potentials, understand the world of work, develop career alternatives, plan career paths and prepare for a career. However, it is also possible that a wide range of other factors coalesce to mould attitudes and mind-sets toward work.

Research into the impact of career counselling has shown positive outcomes (e.g. Oliver & Spokane, 1988; Kidd & Killeen, 1992) and the question of whether career counselling

works, is no longer asked. Yet, the intended outcomes of careers services could remain disconnected from felt needs until they connect with local realities. If theories of career development and the interventions that emerge from these theories are to be meaningful, they must be attuned to the ways of thinking and living that compose the fabric of a society (e.g. Watson, 2004; Arulmani, 2006). We have attempted to blend career guidance and counselling services into native contexts, by using a collection of constructs that we refer to as the *Cultural Preparedness* framework (Arulmani, 2009).

The cultural preparedness approach to career counselling

A culture prepares its members to engage with life in a particular manner. The learning that occurs between an individual and his or her culture is not only the result of interactions with present members of that culture but is drawn from a deep repository of experience that has accumulated and grown over the ages. Methods of counselling that are commonly practiced today have their roots in Western cultures. One of the reasons for the success of these approaches could be that the counsellor and counselee, in the West, share a similar cultural heritage: a heritage that has *prepared* them over a period of time to engage with each other in a manner that allows a certain kind of interpersonal relationship to be formed and sustained. It is essential to note however, that the same approach may be neither necessary nor sufficient for a people who come from a different cultural heritage (Arulmani, 2009). A method of counselling that places the *individual* on centre stage, for example, may not find resonance amongst a people whose culture has prepared them to approach their existence in self-effacing and community oriented manner.

The cultural preparedness approach points out that career development occurs under the influence of a wide range of factors. Family and parents, social practices, religious persuasion, economic climate, political orientations... all come together to create a certain environment within which attitudes and opinions are formed about different careers. The young taxi driver's statement reflects one such orientation to work and livelihood. We

have used the term ‘social-cognitive environment’ to describe the milieu within which attitudes toward work, livelihood and careers are formed and forged (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004).

Social cognitions and career beliefs

Social cognitions are patterns of thinking that have become habitual across social groups (Bandura, 1989). Social-cognitive environments engender habitual ways of thinking, which influence career development. Attitudes, opinions, convictions and notions cohere together to create mindsets and beliefs that underlie people’s orientation to the idea of a career. We use the term career beliefs to refer to this conglomerate of cognitions about career decision-making and career planning (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004). These patterns of beliefs maybe internalised not only within the minds of single individuals but also in the community as a whole and transmitted to the young in that community through a process of social learning.

Career beliefs could colour the manner in which a career aspirant deals with career development tasks. Some examples of common career beliefs are: “Boys are better at mathematics and science than girls”, or “Black youth are lazy”, or “Immigrants are at a disadvantage in the job market”. The impact of career beliefs on the career development process can be marked and critical. The effectiveness of career counselling can crumble if prevailing career beliefs are left unaddressed.

Types of career beliefs

Our research has indicated that the content of career beliefs could be thematically classified (Arulmani, 2008). Some of the most common belief themes that have emerged during the course of our investigations in different cultural contexts are briefly described below.

Proficiency Beliefs

This theme taps into the importance attributed to acquiring qualifications and skills that can enhance personal proficiency for an occupation before entering the world of work. These beliefs describe the willingness to submit to the rigors of a formal training programme and spend resources (time, effort and finances) to achieve the distinction of being formally qualified as per the norms of a given educational system. A common belief we have documented amongst Asian young people from disadvantaged backgrounds for example is that “going to school is a waste of time, since this does not lead to a job anyway”. This is a statement that reflects a low emphasis on acquiring formal qualifications.

Control and Self Direction Beliefs

Situations and experiences influence the direction that one’s life can take. These beliefs reflect the individual’s sense of control over his or her life situation and the orientation to directing his or her life. Mind-sets in this category are linked to the career aspirant’s belief that he or she can deal with the exigencies presented by life situations. During a psychological needs survey in Rwanda (Arulmani, 2003), a young girl I met said to me: “My future is dark because of the tribe I belong to. There is not much I can do about that.” This is an example of beliefs that can impinge upon a person’s sense of control and self-direction.

Common Practice

Common practice and unwritten norms shape the career preparation behaviour of a community in a certain way. In middle class India for example, it is expected that a ‘bright’ student would take up either medicine or engineering as a career. Young people strive to fit into this expectation. As this 17 year old boy says, “I may be talented in something but my family and others may expect me to do something else. It will be difficult to go against society.” Statements such as these reveal the strong influence of common practice on career choices.

Self Worth

This theme is related to one's belief in personal ability for career preparation. A section of high school students in India commonly say, "I keep on failing in Mathematics and Science. I am not talented enough to get a good job." This statement reflects the career chooser's belief in relation to academic performance and career preparation.

Persistence Beliefs

Successful career development requires the individual to face and attempt to overcome difficulties and hurdles that punctuate progress toward a career goal. The content of these beliefs reflect the determination to work toward future career goals in spite of the barriers encountered during the process of career preparation. These beliefs reflect a sense of purposefulness and resolve to strive for positive outcomes in the future. The content of the following statement is an example reflecting low persistence: "I joined a course in basic computer skills for beginners. The course is so hard. I find it boring. I feel this course is not suitable for me and I want to stop."

Fatalism

The content of these beliefs portray a sense of resignation and a passive acceptance of one's life situation. Fatalistic beliefs are coloured by the feeling of pessimism, a sense that nothing can be changed and that matters are pre-ordained by more powerful forces. The following statement displays fatalistic content: "Life situations are such that one cannot 'choose' a career. We are just given something. Then fate takes its course."

Eliciting career beliefs

Career counselling could be more effective when underlying belief structures are identified. Given below is an overview of two simple methods on how career beliefs operating in a particular situation could be made more explicit and brought into the purview of career counselling.

The Career beliefs diary

This is a device to help clients identify their career beliefs and the impact of their attitudes and mindsets on career development. The client is provided with a template within which to record thoughts he or she experiences in relation to career planning tasks, the emotions that emerge in response to these thoughts and the possible outcomes of these thoughts and emotions.

Indian students are required to make commitments to career paths at the end of higher secondary education. A 17 year old student who was completing higher secondary education in about 3 months requested to be seen individually, after she had participated in group career counselling workshops held routinely for her class. During the first session she indicated that although a number of friends, teachers and parents suggested that she takes up careers in the field of Design, she was she was still very confused. She was asked to start a Career Beliefs Diary. Given below is an extract of a few entries from her diary.

Career Beliefs Diary: Extract from a higher secondary student's diary.

| Date | Activity | Thought | Emotion | Action |
|------------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| 14 th Jan 2009 | Read about entrance examination to design school. | Oh God! I have to prepare a portfolio. | My work is so not good to be shown to others. | Stop thinking about design as a career. |
| 15 th Jan 2009 | Completed Art Class record books for internal assessment. | I will not get good marks. | Felt so scared that I will fail. | Didn't submit the book to teacher. |
| 16 th Jan 2009 | Have to go to principal for certificate to submit to design school. | He will say he won't give a certificate. | Everyone says I'm good, but I know I'm not...it's no use... I won't make it. | Postponed going to principal. |

The student maintained a diary for ten days. The rest of her entries were similar to extract shown above. Analysis of the content of her entries shows quite clearly, that she is influenced by 'self-worth' beliefs. In this case, the client's self-worth beliefs in relation to her designing skills were low. This in turn was affecting her persistence toward the goal of preparing for a career in design. Career counselling therefore targeted this aspect of her career beliefs.

As shown in the illustration above, a diary can facilitate the examination thought patterns over a period of time. Diary entries point to career beliefs that are prevalent in the diary keeper's mind and the potential impact they have on career preparation. A Career Beliefs Diary can provide concrete material for career counselling. We have also found quite often that just keeping a diary helps promote awareness and change in a client.

The vignette technique

What are vignettes?

Vignettes are carefully constructed verbal pictures, drawn from the common experiences of a client group (Wilson, 1998). They simulate or re-create real events and situations and are designed to identify attitudes and elicit opinions. Vignettes place abstract ideas within a familiar context and thereby help the person understand or identify with the idea more easily. We have found that vignettes are an effective way to help a career chooser learn about his or her thoughts, perceptions and unexpressed feelings about matters related to career choice and development. Vignettes offer a certain 'distance' from one's personal opinions and hence provide an opportunity to move beyond socially acceptable responses and discussions.

Developing vignettes to address career beliefs

Step 1: Listen to commonly used statements

Quite often, career beliefs are reflected in sentences and phrases commonly used by a group of people when they describe career development. “The best careers are science careers”, “Only poor people do blue collar jobs”, for example, are phrases one commonly hears in India. “I cannot leave my island”, “This job is beneath my son’s dignity... I would rather that he remains unemployed,” are examples of common statements I came across all over the Maldives. “Who knows what will happen in the future? There even maybe war again,” “I have to think of ‘now’ not of tomorrow,” are poignant statements I elicited from 16 year olds in the interiors of Rwanda. Embedded within these statements are belief patterns that could have a powerful influence on career preparation. Bringing such expressions into a career counselling interaction is central to the cultural preparedness approach. A skilled counsellor would be able to ‘listen’ to the career beliefs that underlie such statements.

Step 2: Look for patterns in these statements

Career beliefs may be ‘stated’ in different ways by a client group, but they may all cluster around a certain career belief theme. Our experience with the vignette technique has shown that patterns and common ‘threads’ can be identified in repeatedly used statements. Step 2 in the vignette technique is to look for the themes that lie behind the statements. We use the career belief themes described above as a framework within which to analyse statements.

Step 3: Embed the content of these statements into vignettes

The next step is to write vignettes that reflect the career belief content of the statements that have been collected. Given below is an example that shows the conversion into a vignette, of a set of statements that reflect the Proficiency Belief.

Table 1: Developing a Proficiency Belief Vignette from statements

| <i>Statements commonly used by adolescents and parents from a low socio-economic status background in India</i> | <i>Vignette</i> |
|--|--|
| If I can earn there is no need to study further. | Sunder is so lucky! He got a job in a petrol bunk. He is paid 2000 rupees a month. His earnings go to the family which helps them all very much. Sunder feels so proud that he has a job and can support his family so early in his life. He has decided to continue working at the petrol bunk. This means he has to go to work during school time. Sometimes the work even goes into the night. It means Sunder has to stop going to school. |
| Studying after high school is of no use. | |
| My son keeps on failing in school. So what is the use of sending him to school? Better he just goes to work. | |
| I am a self-taught mason. I did not go to school. If my son just works with me he will learn the job. So why send him to school? | |
| If I go to the training programme, it means I cannot earn. In fact I have to spend rather than earn. So it is not worth it to go for any training. | |
| <i>Note:</i> The name of the boy in this vignette is an Indian name. It is important that these details accurately reflect the local context. | |

Vignettes such as these can be used during career development workshops to stimulate discussion and provoke young people to think about their career beliefs. They provide a contextualised link to the client’s career beliefs and offer the opportunity to sharpen clients’ sensitivity to the various issues that surround career development.

Dealing with career beliefs

Career beliefs by definition are unreasoned convictions. They may or may not be grounded in fact. They may or may not be helpful to the career development process. The Career Beliefs Diary described above is an example of how career beliefs and their impact could be delineated. The vignette technique sets out a method for the conversion of personalised statements into broader stories that a group could explore.

Once a career belief has been identified, client/s and counsellor could collaboratively explore the belief. The counsellor could present facts and figures that client/s could examine. Take the example of ubiquitous statement amongst young people in the

Republic of Maldives that it is, “the government’s responsibility to give me a job” – a reflection of their control and self-direction beliefs. This information was used to develop a national career guidance programme that focussed on skills for self-mediated career development (Arulmani & Abdulla, 2007).

Bringing career beliefs into the career counselling process could help the career chooser realise how effective career choices are sometimes blocked by belief structures that he or she is unaware of. A career counselling target would be to help the client consider career choices based on personal interests, preferences, talents and aptitudes, rather than being led by unhelpful career beliefs.

The effectiveness of techniques such as these is enhanced when they are drawn from the life situation of the target group and reflect locally prevailing career beliefs. It is important to note that the purpose of such an exercise is not to contradict the client. Nor is it intended to point the client toward ‘better’ ways of thinking. Instead, the objective is to bring into the sharper awareness of the career chooser, the impact that career beliefs could have on opportunities and life chances.

Working on career beliefs with the individual alone may not be sufficient or effective. Career beliefs are enduring and resistant to change, so much so that they are transmitted across generations. Drawing the family into the counselling process and highlighting the impact of career beliefs on career development is important, particularly in collectivistic societies.

A further, critical, point to be considered is the fact that career beliefs are not restricted to the client alone. The counsellor too operates from within a specific social-cognitive framework. It is quite possible that the counsellor’s own ways of thinking could be imposed on the client and his or her family. When this happens career counselling merely perpetuates another set of career beliefs. The case study given below illustrates how important it is for the counsellor to be aware and sensitive to personal beliefs and attitudes.

Case Study: A counsellor and her career beliefs

Renuka is a mathematics teacher who recently joined a Government high school for students from socio-economically disadvantaged homes. She found that her students' aspirations did not take them beyond accepting just any unskilled job that came their way. Their parents were mostly casual labourers and worked on construction sites on a daily wage. Being from a typical middle class Indian background, Renuka was brought up to believe that education is all important. Furthermore, her family and community believed that a good career is possible only through the Sciences. Renuka developed a deep concern for her students and wanted to help them become engineers and doctors. She took up a short course in career counselling. She then offered a five-session career counselling programme for her students. Renuka prepared wonderful charts, posters and worksheets. The programme was meticulously planned.

Her class was full the first day. All her students came in. However, Renuka found that she could not hold their attention. The next session had only a few students and by the third session – no one came to her workshop any more. Distressed and discouraged, Renuka called us for advice. We took the cultural preparedness approach to help her understand the process of career counselling. Renuka quickly discovered that her conception of 'success' was entirely different from her students' understanding of 'getting ahead'. Renuka's culture believed that the pathway to success was through education. Her students' economic situation forced them to focus on the here and now and look for anything that would help them earn a living as quickly as possible. She realised that in the face of financial crisis, middle class families like hers would struggle hard *not* to sacrifice children's education. On the other hand, her students' families, being from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, held beliefs that pushed them to the opposite side. They would let go of education at the earliest and look for a means of income.

Renuka went away and re-planned her approach to career counselling for her students. She focused first of all on laying aside her own career beliefs and starting with the beliefs of her students. Her programme this time focused on the following key action points:

- Helping students understand the impact of their proficiency beliefs on their attitude to career preparation.
- Helping her students get a slow and small start, gaining a skill in an affordable manner and gradually building up their lives using available government schemes and scholarships.
- Interacting with parents to make them partners in the career development of their children.

This time around, it was much more difficult to start again, because her students viewed her with scepticism and labelled her as someone from the ‘other side’. Initially she was able to attract only a handful for students. But gradually, as students began to realise that their counsellor understood their situation and was trying to help them build their lives from where they were, they started returning to her programmes. Renuka’s final words to us illustrates the cultural preparedness approach to career counselling: “I started with all my good intentions.” she said. “But when I began interacting with my students, I realised that what I had to offer was not important to them at all. Instead, I had to learn to be a partner with my students. I had to learn not only to give, but also to receive from them. I had to learn from my students, before I could give.”

Conclusion

The nature of cultural preparedness could vary from one cultural group to another. The cultural preparedness approach gives a careers programme a contextually relevant identity and can thereby integrate into the fabric of the way in which a people live their lives. It attempts in fact to help a counsellor understand what deep rooted belief structures might underlie the young taxi driver’s statement: “...and when I have enough cash for my mealie meals, I just stop for the day!”

Review questions

The following questions are designed to help you consolidate what we have discussed in this chapter:

1. Explain the meaning of ‘cultural preparedness’ and critique its relevance to the practice of career counselling.
2. True or False?
 - a. Career beliefs are always negative and hinder career development.
 - b. Beliefs related to the importance of acquiring formal qualifications are called control and self-direction beliefs.
 - c. A career chooser who gives up in the face of barriers could be under the influence of persistence beliefs.

- d. A person who fights against the system to achieve career development goals would have low levels of control and self-direction beliefs.
 - e. A family that wants their son to achieve ‘the highest qualifications’ possible, would have a low level of proficiency beliefs.
3. Use the following statements to develop a vignette to discuss proficiency beliefs for bored high school students from wealthy backgrounds.
- a. Why the heck should I bother to pass? In any case, I’ve got my dads business.
 - b. Studies. Ugh. Boring. And then work? I don’t have to.
 - c. Commitment? To a career? That’s so not me.
4. Write a critical appraisal of the construct ‘social-cognitive environment’. Show its relation to the cultural preparedness approach to career counselling.

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