Advocating Workers-Within-Environment: A Critical Perspective for Addressing Career Concerns

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The author provides a critical analysis of career theory and practice before presenting a theory of counseling for career concerns. The critical analysis identifies 3 core critiques of current career counseling approaches. The advocating workers-within-environment theory is described as a humanistic social justice approach focusing on critical consciousness development.

Critical theory provides a framework for a reflective critique of societal and cultural phenomena with the expressed purpose “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). More specifically, postmodern critical theory embraces the instability of meaning and power ascribed to sociopolitical structures that enslave or oppress and proposes that such structures should be open to debate, reflection, or intellectual deconstruction. Postmodern critical theory is a politicized perspective that encourages criticism as a means of focusing on social problems and systems with the purpose of changing structures so that they become more humanizing and just. This article includes a postmodern critique of current career counseling practice in an effort to break the chains of conformity engendered by career counseling’s history.

Career concerns, presented in this article as work-related concerns manifested within counseling practice regardless of the counseling type or modality, have been considered relevant within the fields of counseling and psychology since the origins of these professions. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychology, described the goal of therapy as being to help the patient find meaning through both work and love (Erikson, 1963). Frank Parsons (1909) is often claimed to hold two titles: father of counseling and father of career counseling theory. The vestiges of these pioneers’ work have remained salient throughout the 20th century as the fields of
career counseling and vocational psychology have grown (Holland, 1997; Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976; Savickas, 2005; Super, 1957). Structurally, career counseling and vocational psychology have been both part of and separated from the broader professional counseling and psychology organizations in the decades since their genesis. This has resulted in the consistent, and oftentimes insular, development of career-specific theories, models, techniques, assessments, and resources in addition to the professional identity of the career counselor. Despite any perceived schism between counseling and career counseling work, the broader trends in the latter neatly mirror the former over time, including periods focused on measurement and diagnosis (e.g., Holland, 1997), social learning and cognitive approaches (e.g., social cognitive career theory [Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994]; cognitive information processing [Peterson, Sampson, Lenz, & Reardon, 2002]), and postmodernism (career construction theory [Savickas, 2005]; chaos theory of careers [Bright & Pryor, 2005]). Finally, recent theoretical work that focused on justice and egalitarianism (e.g., psychology of working [Blustein, 2013]) reflects initial efforts to critically explore career counseling approaches with the goal of making them more humane and humanizing.

Despite recent efforts and similar developmental trajectories, career counseling has largely escaped the critical lens diligently applied to psychology (e.g., Prilleltensky, 1997) and multicultural counseling (e.g., Goodman & Gorski, 2015). There is a need for critical reflection of career counseling theory and practice. Critical consciousness concepts should be incorporated within the provision of counseling services for client career concerns. Freire (1970) defined critical consciousness (or conscientizacao) as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). For the theory proposed later in this article, advocating workers-within-environment (AWE), critical consciousness is a core conceptual idea designed to illuminate systems of oppression perpetuated by the world of work. Career concerns are presenting problems found at the nexus of work and mental health, wellness, academic achievement, relationships, and family systems. It is assumed that all counselors, if they are looking, will find career concerns present in their practice because work is one of the ubiquitous factors in the composition of clients’ lives.

This article is not the first to approach components of a critical analysis of career counseling theory from a humanistic (Sterner, 2012) or socially just (Blustein, 2013) perspective, nor is it the first such effort to combine these two philosophical schools toward the critique of a counseling field of practice (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014). Critical analyses reflect a belief that current career theory fails to fully address the inequities of the world of work. Turning away from further critique and recommendations is a pathway fraught with peril, as described in Goodman and Gorski’s (2015) analytical critique of multicultural counseling:
We do not lack frameworks and approaches for deconstructing problematic counseling and psychology paradigms and practices, nor do we lack counselors and psychologists who desire to adopt the paradigms and practices that will help them connect more effectively with the full diversity of humanity or create a more equitable or just world. The danger, however, is that too often “multicultural” counseling and psychology are practiced or theorized in ways that actually replicate the power arrangements they ought to be dismantling. (pp. 1–2)

The same danger exists for counseling focused on career concerns—that career counseling and vocational psychology are theorized or practiced in ways that perpetuate the power dynamics they ought to dismantle.

CRITICALLY CONCEPTUALIZING CAREER COUNSELING

*Career Work as Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD)*

The fields of counseling and psychology make evidence-based claims regarding human nature and development while drawing predominantly from research in only WEIRD societies and samples (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). For example, in an analysis of six psychology disciplines, Arnett (2008) found that research published between 2003 and 2007 drew 68% of the samples from the United States and 96% from Western industrialized countries. In other words, during this time period, 96% of psychological research samples represented only 12% of the world’s population. Although neither vocational psychology nor counseling was examined specifically in Arnett’s study, these areas of scholarship have drawn heavily from basic psychological research throughout history and at the least are heavily influenced by this phenomenon.

Two potential assumptions seem to exist in counseling and psychological literature: Either it is assumed that human populations display little variation across cultures and differences or it is assumed that WEIRD subjects are considered “standard subjects” or a preferred point of reference in comparison with all other groups (Henrich et al., 2010). A thorough review of research on human variation in the fields of counseling and psychology finds that the assumption of little variation across human populations does not have merit (Medin & Atran, 2004; Rozin, 2001). Several aspects of human psychological functioning have shown great variation, including self-concept (Triandis, 1994), positive self-views (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004), personal agency (Iyengar & DeVoe, 2003; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999), and motivations to conform (Bond & Smith, 1996). The assumption that non-WEIRD groups are nonstandard groups is antithetical to the ubiquitous paradigms of multicultural and social justice counseling that are expected to influence the specific field of career counseling (Leung, 1995; Pope & Pangelinan, 2010). Thus, there seems to be ample evidence of broad, systemic bias within the fields of counseling and psychology research,
theory, and practice—and by proxy career counseling and vocational psychology research, theory, and practice—that has yet to be sufficiently addressed within the professional literature.

Career Work as Dehumanization

Both humanistic and social justice counseling philosophies acknowledge the importance of humanization and dehumanization. “Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human” (Freire, 1970, p. 44). Counselors who focus on career concerns to humanize their practice must strive to (a) imbue others with worthiness and dignity, simply because they are human (Levinas, 1972); (b) enhance the relatedness between persons both within and outside the counseling relationship (Frankl, 1966); and (c) promote the capacity of clients to pursue worth, dignity, and relatedness within the sociopolitical context in which they live (Blustein, 2013; Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014). By posing the problem of a client’s own dehumanization in the world of work, critical consciousness is awakened. As Freire (1970) put it, “The awakening of critical consciousness leads the way to the expression of social discontents precisely because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation” (p. 36). Thus, the following is the essential question in this critique: Does career counseling embrace the humanization of clients within current approaches to theory and practice?

Using Prilleltensky’s (1997) model for evaluating psychological approaches, I briefly explicate a critique of current career counseling practices. Traditional approaches, defined as approaches in which the primary ethos is personal adjustment (Prilleltensky, 1997), describe many prevailing career approaches, including person–environment fit theories (Holland, 1997), developmental theories (Super, 1957), and social learning theories (Lent et al., 1994). The values-based assumptions inherent to these approaches preserve individuality, meritocracy, and personal freedom while potentially supporting unjust sociopolitical structures. Empowering approaches such as integrative life planning (Hansen, 1996) or values-based career theory (Brown, 2002) assume personal control and empowerment at the potential expense of social fragmentation through the pursuit of individualistic career goals. Finally, postmodern approaches such as career construction (Savickas, 2005) and chaos theory of career (Bright & Pryor, 2005) value context and diversity of experience but potentially risk sociopolitical withdrawal or disengagement, thus affecting the very social fabric within which one must work and exist. The majority of current career theory and practice falls within a dehumanizing framework of practice that potentially denies a sense of community and the importance of emancipating every member of society and the world (Prilleltensky, 1997).
Career Work as Colonization

According to Marsella (2015), colonization describes the sources of socialization imposed on nondominant cultures that deny the socialized “the opportunity to explore their roots and to build their character and person within the historical context of their native cultural traditions” (p. vii). In the area of counseling for career concerns, the “Eurocentric paradigm of modernity” (Goodman & Gorski, 2015, p. 4) propagated by dominant theoretical and practice approaches must be questioned. Particularly, counseling professionals must ask how their approach to career concerns perpetuates a system of work that asks nothing of the colonizer (dominant majority or privileged) and everything of the colonized.

The postcolonial theory concept of alterity, or otherness, describes the mechanisms by which some individuals are pushed to the social margins and kept there on the outside looking in (Bauman & Gingrich, 2006). Goodman and Gorski (2015) provided an excellent example of how the hegemonic norm might be perpetuated for an oppressed person within a counseling environment addressing career concerns:

If our goal is social justice, do we wish only to understand the cultural beliefs of an undocumented Mexican immigrant mother, or should we also wonder, with equal curiosity, about who benefits from the policies that prompted her decision to migrate, her vulnerability to wage discrimination, and other structural matters that inform her experience? (p. 5)

Counseling for career concerns is complicit in this dominant, colonial view of career counseling practice as long as counselors sit in contrast to their clients, their problems, and their cultures.

ADVOCATING WORKERS-WITHIN-ENVIRONMENT (AWE)

Assuming the perspective that the critiques provided in this article must be addressed, I next offer a theory for the practice of career counseling that strives to acknowledge and address the issues raised. It is important to begin this section by disclosing that I am the product of a WEIRD society who has lived life largely unaware of the dehumanizing elements and colonial structures in place that oppress and enslave others. Whether or not I have had an awakening to these phenomena is certainly debatable, yet I do feel compelled to exercise my privilege in writing the prior critique and subsequent response. AWE theory is philosophically grounded in the tenets of humanism and social justice in that the counselor is encouraged to recognize the interrelatedness of clients and their relationships, community, society, and sociopolitical structures that pertain to work and employment. Interventions are designed to encourage the client to critically analyze these contexts while developing self-knowledge within a marginalized-to-privileged continuum. Using problem-posing techniques in the context
of the sociopolitical structures that compose the working world leads to self-insight that can be parlayed into developing self-advocacy skills and strategies to meet career and personal goals.

As a privileged counselor practicing from an AWE perspective, I am aware that it is important to explicate the positioning of the counselor in relationship to clients, particularly those clients who are marginalized within the world of work. According to Lemberger (2010),

[AWE theory] operates from the philosophical position that each human is always experiencing others, broadly defined, and is experienced by others. Within these shared experiences between self and others, the self is reliant upon one’s adaptive wits to respond to social experiences. (p. 133)

Much like the advocating students-within-environment theory (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014), AWE theory uses Bandura’s (1986, 1989, 2001) description of human functioning to describe the richness of the complex relationship between person and environment. Bandura (1989) explained that “persons are neither autonomous agents nor simply mechanical conveyors of animating environmental influences. Rather, they make causal contribution to their own motivation and action within a system of triadic reciprocal causation” (p. 1175). According to Bandura, agency is conceptualized as three interacting and interrelating forces: human or personal agency (i.e., any individual, in this case the client with career concerns), collective agency (i.e., the agency of the whole, in this case the world of work), and proxy agency (i.e., the agency of intermediaries aligned with the object agent or client). The point of contact therefore is in the counseling session wherein the counselor assumes the role of proxy agent with the individual client who is operating in context or within environment. The role of proxy agent and other essential elements of AWE theory are further described in the following sections.

Counselor as Proxy Agent

Within the triadic reciprocal model of the counseling relationship, the counselor sits as proxy agent in close proximity to the personal agency of the client. It is here that the idea of advocacy must be clarified, because the counselor/proxy agent’s purpose is not to advocate for the client but to advocate for the client’s personal agency so as to not “impede the cultivation of personal competencies” (Bandura, 2001, p. 13). To accomplish this difficult assignment, the counselor must assume a collaborative relationship with the client so that both the client and the counselor assume positions of expertise, insight, and action with the goal of magnifying the client’s personal agency always kept in sight. “In this way, advocacy is never on behalf of the student or even the collective, but instead with (and within) the student and collective agencies at all times and in all ways” (Lemberger, 2010, p. 134). Therefore, a positive
outcome of counseling intervention is always found in the activation of the client’s critical consciousness and personal agency, the core competencies viewed as necessary outcomes according to AWE theory. For example, the case of a client who experiences more equitable and just treatment in the work environment as a result of counseling may or may not be considered a successful outcome. The critical factor is whether or not the positive experience was activated via the counselor’s agency or that of the client.

**Principle of Reflective Intervention Designs**

The principle of reflective intervention designs is important in both the nature of the counseling relationship (i.e., reciprocal in nature) and the connection between the client and work environment. Giddons (1991) stated, “The altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive [self-referential] process of connecting personal and social change” (p. 337). Counseling for career concerns therefore “becomes a shared process of enlisting as many individuals as is relevant, ethical, and necessary toward the end that each individual agent and the collective agency [work environments] is better able to function” (Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014, p. 33). The following basic tenets can be used when planning or evaluating AWE-influenced career counseling interventions:

1. Client and counselor collaboratively establish clear goals for resolution of the career concerns expressed by the client.
2. Client and counselor are able to identify environmental factors (i.e., collective agency) that influence the attainment of desired goals of counseling.
3. Client and counselor clarify specific environmental factors that will facilitate or impede goal attainment.
4. Client and counselor determine the magnitude with which the client can exercise his or her own agency within the work environment.
5. Client and counselor plan for multiple scenarios in which the client, the client’s actions, environmental factors, and desired goals will interact to the benefit or impediment of the client’s wishes.

**Problem-Posing as Reflective Career Counseling Intervention**

Problem-posing education was developed by Freire (1970) to develop education as a practice of freedom, as opposed to domination, for liberation of oppressed or colonized individuals. Problem-posing education denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. (Freire, 1970, p. 81)
The six points of reference (McLaren, 1999) used to teach problem-posing education can also be used in counseling for career concerns. According to McLaren (1999), AWE-influenced career counselors using the problem-posing method will

1. Approach client acts of knowing as being grounded in individual experiences and contexts.
2. Conceptualize the historical/cultural world of the client as a transformable reality shaped by individual and collective perceptions.
3. Help the client make connections between his or her own conditions and the socially constructed conditions comprised of the realities of others.
4. Encourage clients to consider how they can shape the collective reality through individual acts of knowing, thus creating a new collectively created reality.
5. Help the client develop personal agency skills to impact the environment through his or her own acts of knowing.
6. Collaborate with the client to identify the myths propagated by the dominant social discourse so that the cycle of enslavement or oppression can be interrupted and eventually broken. (p. 51)

The problem-posing process is designed to concurrently illuminate the pathway to resolving career concerns while revealing the sociopolitical structures that have created the unjust world of work within which clients operate. The act of identifying and working to dismantle unjust systems will liberate the worker from the systemic norms that had previously been accepted blindly. In other words, as the veil of conformity is lifted, the work of amplifying personal agency within the environment might amplify clients’ contribution to the work environment or collective agency, or personal agency may be directed toward rejection of the collective agency as an act of personal nonconformity to the system (i.e., disobedience to challenge the system from without vs. within).

Praxis, described by Freire (1970) as “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (p. 126), becomes an awakening to one’s own oppressed conditions within the world of work, allowing for the identification of allies within these conditions who may work to collaboratively alleviate career concerns and restructure oppressive systems. The Latino American union organizer Cesar Chavez is one example of a worker whose own process of conscientizacao awakened him to the sociopolitical structures of the agricultural system within which he worked. This awakening led him toward the alleviation of his own career concerns by dismantling the system within which he worked, using allies (i.e., fellow oppressed farmers) to accomplish these goals and dismantle the oppressive farming industry (Chavez, 1975). Although clients presenting with career concerns may not become internationally recognized union
organizers, they can each be empowered to enact their own agency toward the end of their choosing whether it be accomplishing personal career goals within the existing system or working to dismantle it.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I used postmodern critical theory as a framework to critique the current theory and practice of career counseling. On the basis of this critique, I offered a new theory of counseling for career concerns. AWE theory attempts to address concerns about oppression and colonization through the current practice of career counseling by focusing on a proxy agency-based counseling relationship designed to activate client critical consciousness through reflective intervention designs such as problem-posing. The essence of this approach is captured by McLaren (1999) as he reflected on the influence of Paulo Freire’s work:

Freire believed that the ongoing production of the social world through dialogue occurs in dialectical interplay with the structural features of society such as its social relations of production, cultural formations, and institutional arrangements. In the process of becoming literate—a process Freire referred to as “praxis”—meaning circulates, is acted upon, and revised, resulting in political interpretation, sense-making, and will formation. The outcome of this intersubjectivity produced through praxis is never fully predetermined. (p. 49)

The process of praxis as facilitated from the AWE perspective makes a unique contribution to counseling for career concerns in that it unlocks the door to client phenomenological experience while addressing issues unique to marginalization, oppression, and enslavement.

Praxis-oriented approaches stand in stark contrast to existing career counseling theoretical approaches. The theories of Holland (1997), Super (1957), and the social learning theorists focus on individual agency without fully embracing the reflexive relationship with the environment (i.e., community agency) that creates systemic oppression. Empowerment approaches such as those of Brown (2002) and Hansen (1996) do acknowledge client culture but fail to address the possibility of social fragmentation as the client is encouraged to myopically focus on self-interest in the pursuit of career goals. Finally, postmodern approaches such as career construction (Savickas, 2005) and chaos theory of careers (Bright & Pryor, 2005) risk client disengagement from the sociopolitical milieu because the contextual domain can be perceived as overwhelming to the client’s own agency.

AWE theory is an approach to counseling for career concerns that believes in the agentic self as it exists in the environmental milieu. This milieu is both uniquely experienced and partially created by the individual client. Using reflective intervention designs such as problem-posing, AWE theory strives to fully respect social and cultural factors such as oppression and enslavement as they are phenomenologically perceived by the client in
the workplace. The counselor and client work in collaboration to question, explore, and critique current career phenomena while working to reach career and personal goals through counseling. As applied to career counseling tasks such as career decisions, the search for work, and life planning, AWE theory can liberate the counseling relationship so that it becomes more than planned conformity within the existing sociopolitical structures that make up the world of work.

REFERENCES


