

**Life Career Development:  
A Needed Perspective for all Counseling**

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Vast and far-reaching changes are occurring in the nature and structure of the personal/social and family systems in which people live and the industrial and occupational structures where they work. Individuals' values and beliefs about themselves, others, and the world are changing, as are the ways they look at and understand their own growth and development. More and more people are looking for meaning and coherence in their lives, particularly as they think about the work they do, their situation as family members and as individuals, their involvement in their community, their role in education and training, and their involvement in leisure activities. Our society has become multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural. Women are entering the labor force in record numbers and men are questioning traditionally held beliefs about their roles.

Caught up in the consequences of these vast and far-reaching changes, more and more individuals of all ages and circumstances are seeking help from counselors. They are looking for assistance to help them deal with the increasingly complex and dynamic world in which they live, with situations and conditions they feel are often beyond their control. They are finding that the life roles in which they are involved (worker, learner, partner), their life settings (home, school, work), and the life events that impact them (planned and unplanned) are all intertwined and interactive. For them, the line between career and personal social issues are blurring and disappearing.

Given the complexity of the conditions and issues that clients are facing today, how can counselors help them understand and reckon with these conditions and issues? I believe that a perspective of human growth and development called “life career development” can be helpful. It can provide a way for clients and counselors to see relevant client conditions and issues in meaningful relationships. It can offer real-world language to identify, describe, and understand client issues and conditions, a language that clients can understand and can use to begin to solve their problems and reach their goals.

### **What is Life Career Development?**

Modern theories of career development began appearing in the literature during the 1950s. At that time the occupational choice focus of the first 40 years of career development was beginning to give way to a broader, more comprehensive view of individuals and their occupational development over the life span. In the 1960s, knowledge about occupational choice as a developmental process increased dramatically. At the same time, the terms *career* and *career development* became popular, so that today many people prefer them to *vocation* and *vocational development*. This expanded view of career and career development was more useful than the earlier view of career development as occupational choice because it broke the time barrier previously restricting the vision of career development to a cross-sectional view of an individual’s life.

In the 1970s, the definitions of *career* and *career development* used by some writers became broader and more encompassing. Jones and others (1972) defined *career* as encompassing a variety of possible patterns of personal choice related to an individual’s total lifestyle, including occupation, education, personal and social behavior, learning how to learn, social responsibility, and leisure time activities. Gysbers and Moore (1975) proposed the concept of *life career development* in an effort to expand and extend career development from an occupational perspective to a life perspective in which occupation (and work) has place and meaning. They defined *life career development* as self-development over the life span through

the integration of the roles, settings, and events of a person's life. The word *life* in *life career development* meant that the focus was on the total person—the human career. The word *career* identified and related the roles in which individuals were involved (worker, learner, family, citizen), the settings where individuals found themselves (home, school, community, workplace), and the events that occurred over their lifetimes (entry job, marriage, divorce, retirement). Finally, the word *development* was used to indicate that individuals are always in the process of becoming. When used in sequence, the words *life—career—development* brought these separate meanings together, but at the same time a greater meaning emerged. *Life career development* described people, unique people with their own lifestyles.

During the 1990s, it became clear that although the basic configuration of life roles, life settings, and life events interacting and unfolding over the life span was of value, other important factors were at work that influenced the human career. McDaniels and Gysbers (1992) added the factors of gender, ethnic origin, religion, and race to the life career development perspective. These factors were added to underscore their importance in shaping human behavior and to provide individuals with greater explanatory power to understand their life career development. Later, Gysbers, Heppner, and Johnston (2003) changed the factor name of religion to spirituality and added the new factors of social class and sexual orientation.

### **How Can a Life Career Development Perspective be Helpful in Counseling?**

The major purpose in using a life career development perspective in counseling is to provide clients and counselors with real-world language to identify, sort out, and understand the complexities and dynamics of clients' problems, issues, and concerns. Central to this purpose is the assertion that human experience is embedded within one's life-world (*Lebenswelt*), a concept that Husserl (1973) defined as "the world in which we are always already living and which furnishes the ground for all cognitive performance and all scientific determination" (p. 41). In addition, the life career development

perspective responds to Hall's (1996) call for a more holistic view of individuals. "What is needed in career theory and practice is a more holistic view of the individual, one that encompasses all spheres of activity and all corresponding facets of personal identity" (p. 7).

### *Real-World Language*

Clients often become involved in counseling because of pressing life problems, they are in transition by choice, or they are in transition because of conditions over which they have limited or no control. Internal thoughts and feelings about concerning these life problems or transitions, often without shape or form. These thoughts and feelings sometimes appear jumbled and confused, at least on the surface. The life career development perspective can help counselors identify and interpret clients' internal thought and feelings using real-world language (life roles, life settings, life events) that can elucidate clients' thoughts and feelings that once were jumbled and confused. What once may have appeared to be hopeless to clients now can be seen as more hopeful because real-world vocabulary is available to them (life career development terminology) to express themselves more clearly. The life problems or transitions that seemed to be without shape and form can now be seen through the lens of life career development and be related directly to real-life experiences now and in the future.

### *A Wide-Angle Lens to View the Present and Future*

Life career development serves as a wide-angle lens that can bring into view a broad picture of client's problems, concerns, and issues. It also provides clients with a realistic, graphic representation of major life possibilities and responsibilities as well as a language to describe them—their possible selves. It is difficult to consider possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), however, if the lens being used by individuals to view the future is too small to capture the full scope of their life career development and the screen on which it is being projected is not large enough to portray its many dimensions, dynamics, and relationships. Things not seen cannot be a part of individuals' possible selves. "Information that is not known is beyond consideration and cannot form a part of the data necessary for

establishing a possible self” (Cornford, 1995, p. 41).

The life career development view of human development and behavior also provides ways to analyze and understand clients’ development and behavior in career terms, to expand their vision of career, from a work-only focus, to a broader view involving life roles, life settings, and life events that include work, all interacting over the life span. This allows clients to focus on a specific life role while, at the same time, connecting that life role to other life roles, to appreciate the influence various life settings may have on life roles, and to anticipate the possible impact that planned and unplanned events or nonevents may have on career planning and decision making. By using the six factors of gender, ethnic origin, spirituality, race, social class, and sexual orientation and their potential influences, a broadened real-life frame is available on which clients can display, organize, and understand the impact these factors may have on their socialization and on their current and possible selves, in essence, their life career development.

To illustrate the potential of the life career development perspective, consider clients who are struggling with work and family issues and concerns. It is sometimes difficult for these clients to identify, sort out, and understand the dynamics involved. What may be helpful is a perspective to conceptualize these dynamics as well as a structure on which to display them. Often the issues and concerns involved pertain to more than work and family. They also may involve other life roles, settings, and events. Hence the perspective used needs to be broad enough and sensitive enough to identify and respond to these related problems. Bachiochi (1993), paraphrasing the work of Brief and Nord (1990), stressed this point by stating “that to understand the connections among work and other life domains, we must adopt an orientation to the total collection of roles a person plays” (p. 136).

Life career development is such a perspective and, thus, can be a lens through which clients can view and understand work and family concerns. Add the factors of gender, ethnic origin, race, spirituality, social class, and sexual orientation and the lens becomes even more powerful. Now clients have a way of bringing their personal histories

and the histories of their reference groups into focus. Now they can see how these factors have directly or indirectly influenced them, their views of themselves, others, and the world in which they live. Now they have six factors as well as life roles, settings, and events to use to understand and respond to their struggles with work and family issues and concerns.

### **Putting the Life Career Development Perspective to Work**

The opening phase of the counseling process begins when clients share their presenting problems. Sometimes presenting problems are the only problems, but more often other issues and concerns emerge subsequently as the counseling process unfolds. Given this situation, it is wise to keep an open mind concerning clients and the concerns and issues they bring to counseling. The wide-angle lens of the life career development perspective helps us do just that. In addition to providing clients with real-world language and real-world connections to help them understand and deal with their problems, the life career development perspective also gives counselors the same language and connections to use to surface and frame possibly relevant material to process with clients. To that end counselors could do the following:

- Explore clients' views of themselves, others, and their worlds (worldviews).
- Explore clients' ways of making sense out of their past, present, and future life roles, settings, events.
- Focus on cultural/racial/gender specific variables that may influence client behavior.
- Listen for spiritual, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and possible disability issues that may be related to clients' problems.
- Listen for possible personal and environmental barriers or constraints that may arise from clients' home, school, or workplace.

## **Closing Thoughts**

Wolfe and Kolb (1980) summed up the dynamic life-centered view of career that has evolved over the past decades when they described career development as involving one's entire life:

Career development involves one's whole life, not just occupation. As such, it concerns the whole person, needs and wants, capacities and potentials, excitements and anxieties, insights and blind spots, warts and all. More than that, it concerns him/her in the ever-changing contexts of his/her life. The environmental pressures and constraints, the bonds that tie him/her to significant others, responsibilities to children and aging parents, the total structure of one's circumstances are also factors that must be understood and reckoned with. In these terms, career development and personal development converge. Self and circumstances—evolving, changing, unfolding in mutual interaction—constitute the focus and the drama of career development (pp. 1-2).

Wolfe and Kolb (1980) closed their definition of career development with the words “the drama of career development.” This drama could be titled “the drama of the ordinary,” because it unfolds every day and is often not seen or appreciated by individuals. It is veiled by ordinariness. As a result, clients may fail to appreciate its dynamic nature and the substantial impact it has on their lives. By using the perspective of life career development to view and understand client behavior and the problems with which they may be dealing, counselors can offer clients real-world ways to view themselves and their problems, the goal being to make the drama of career development the drama of the extraordinary.

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