Florida State University Libraries

2015

Integrating Assessments into the Career Decision-Making Conversation

Debra S. Osborn, J. Tyler Finklea and Jacqueline G. Belle

Integrating Assessments into the Career Decision-Making Conversation

Debra S. Osborn

J. Tyler Finklea

Jacqueline G. Belle

Introduction

Career assessments play a key role in helping individuals inform their career decisions, whether through clarifying interests, values, and skills, identifying barriers to decision making, or in expanding one's options. We have found that many career counseling clients, often within minutes of initially engaging with a career practitioner, make a statement to the effect of, "I want to take that test that will tell me what I should be." In the sections that follow, we present an argument that career assessments should be part of the overall process of career counseling, not a stand-alone activity. We present a model of incorporating career assessments into the overall career counseling process, and demonstrate that model through use of a case study. In addition, we discuss implications for career service practitioners – but first, we will begin with a review of the purpose/utility of career assessments.

Purpose/Utility of Assessments

Career assessments are used for a variety of reasons including to help an individual clarify their self-knowledge and aide in career decision-making. Wood and Hayes (2013) suggested that a common assumption by career practitioners about career assessments is that they "provide information on self-knowledge, career knowledge, and career-planning skills, all of which are necessary for clients to enhance their career development and career success" (p. 5). In their meta-analytic study of career intervention literature, Brown and Ryan Krane (2000) found that on average, individuals who received a career intervention such as a career assessment

had better career development outcomes as compared to control subjects who didn't receive a career intervention. Additionally, written exercises and individualized interpretations of career assessments were among the five factors that contribute to an individual's ability to make a career choice. Whiston (2002) also reported mean effect sizes ranging from .46 to .66 for assessment interventions in meta-analytic studies, meaning that using interventions resulted in changes that were not only statistically significant, but practically significant; it made a difference for the clients.

Other research studies have shown the value of career assessments. For example, Interest inventories can be used to increase an individual's understanding of their career decision making (Reardon & Lenz, 1999), and the use of computer-based career assessments have been found to increased career decidedness and career decision making self-efficacy (Betz & Borgen, 2009). Career assessments have also proven useful for a study of secondary students with disabilities (Farley, Johnson, & Parkerson, 1999). These students, with a mean age of 16.6 years, participated in a career assessment and planning intervention program. Those who received the intervention were better able to be decisive about their career paths, have more vocational self-awareness, and make vocational decisions with more confidence. In the population of gifted girls, Kerr (1993) found through a meta-analysis of the literature that "without career assessment and intervention throughout the lifespan, gifted young women are at risk for adjusting their interests, aspirations, and achievements to fit their own perceived limitations," (p. 264-265). Other studies have linked the use of career assessments to person-environment congruence (Zanskas & Strohmer, 2010), decreased negative career thinking (Osborn, Howard, & Leierer, 2007), and proactive career behaviors (Hirschi, Freund, & Herrmann, 2013), among others. With

multiple studies showing the positive impact of career assessments, the next question is how to integrate the use of these tools into the career counseling process.

Assessment as Part of the Overall Career Counseling Process

Career assessment is one component within the career counseling process. One model of incorporating career assessment comes from Cognitive Information Processing (CIP; Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004) theory. These authors (2003) identified a seven step sequence of the CIP approach in service delivery, within which career assessment may play a key role, including:

CIP Model of Career Service Delivery

1) Initial interview

2) Preliminary assessment

3) Defining the problem and analyzing the causes

4) Formulating goals

5) Developing an individual learning plan (ILP)

6) Executing the ILP

7) Summative review and generalization

Next, we will briefly outline what happens at each step in the sequence, and in particular, how career assessments might be utilized.

Step One: Initial Interview

The purpose of the initial interview is for the client and practitioner to make a collaborative decision about the level of service delivery that will best fit the client's needs (i.e., self-help, brief staff-assisted services, or individual case-managed services). In addition, the practitioner is listening for potential career assessments that might be appropriate for the client's

needs. The practitioner should use attending skills to pick up on the client's speech related to emotions and thoughts linked to the career problem. Relationship development is also of key importance during this step. Appropriate use of self-disclosure and immediacy can strengthen the therapeutic alliance and assist the practitioner in identifying problems. During the interview, qualitative information is gathered concerning the nature of the career problem. A brief screening question such as, "What brings you here today?" may be used to help determine the client's level of readiness and the appropriate level of service delivery. Potential problems that may require further screening include: uncertainty, confusion, or disabling emotions (Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2003). As the practitioner listens, potential assessments may come to mind, such as an interest inventory, or an inventory that addresses perceived barriers. If a concrete information request is made and none of these potential problems are discovered, the client may be referred to self-help resources. Tools such as the CIP Pyramid of Information Processing Domains and the CASVE Cycle (http://www.career.fsu.edu/techcenter/practitioner/index.html) be provided to the client, and discussed to assist the client in clarifying needs and understanding decision-making. Identifying where the client is in the process can help a practitioner determine the type of career assessment that might be useful. For example, if the client is in the *Communication* stage, non-standardized approaches that examine familial expectations might be useful, whereas if the client is in the *Valuing* stage, a values clarification exercise or assessment might be more appropriate.

Step Two: Preliminary Assessment

A screening assessment can be used to gather quantitative data related to the client's career problem, level of readiness, and factors impacting the client's ability to make a career decision. Comprehensive screening should include test scores and information gained from the

initial interview. Client input should be encouraged, as client participation can help to increase

self-esteem and trust in the process. Effective comprehensive screening instruments should have

the following characteristics: quick administration time, hand or computer scoring capabilities, a

manageable number of scales, and be relatively inexpensive to purchase (Sampson et al., 2003).

Suggested preliminary assessments include: Career Decision Scale (Osipow, 1987) My

Vocational Situation (Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980), Career Factors Inventory (Chartrand,

Robbins & Morrill, 1989), and the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz,

Reardon, & Saunders). The CTI measures negative, or dysfunctional career thinking, and can be

used for the following three purposes: screening, assessment of needs (including nature of career

problem), and as a learning tool in combination with the CTI Workbook to assist the client in

understanding and resolving negative thoughts that are impairing the client's ability to

effectively make a career decision (Sampson et al., 2003). Preliminary assessment of a client

may also include demographic data, background information, and work history, which can

provide important contextual information through which to interpret assessment results.

Step Three: Define Problem and Analyze Causes

In this step, the practitioner and the client come to a collaborative understanding of the

problem, phrased as a gap between the client's real state and ideal state (i.e., where the client is

currently and where they want to be; Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004). Possible

reasons for the gap are discussed and used in the process of goal setting.

Step Four: Formulate Goals

The practitioner and the client work to establish a set of concrete, attainable goals used to

narrow the existing gap. These goals are outlined on an Individual Learning Plan (ILP; Sampson,

Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004; available at

http://www.career.fsu.edu/techcenter/designing_career_services/basic_concepts/index.html) and described using specific objectives connected with each goal. The collaborative relationship is again emphasized, as the client should receive the message that they are in control of service delivery regarding their career problem, and that their contributions are valued in the counseling process (Sampson et al., 2003).

Step Five: Develop Individual Learning Plan (ILP)

The ILP guides future service delivery and assists the client in being able to identify the resources and activities needed to resolve the career problem, as well as establishing an order and time frame for which to complete the listed objectives. The ILP should be flexible enough to adapt as the client and practitioner delve further into the career problem, and may require adjustment to fit newly discovered needs. Clients who are feeling overwhelmed should begin with a shorter ILP, which can be further developed over time (Sampson et al., 2003). Another benefit of using an ILP is that it establishes clearly-defined, mutually agreed-upon expectations regarding services.

One type of activity that might be included on an ILP is the completion of a career assessment. A benefit of using the ILP with career assessments is that it should clearly link back to one of the client's goals, such as "seeing occupations that match my interest" or "learning what I can do with my skills." This allows the client to see why a particular assessment is being used, and the anticipated outcome for using it. It also places career assessments within the broader context of the process of making a career decision; it is one tool that can help the client move towards making a decision. In addition, indicating the expected length of time that will be required to complete the assessment can help the client identify the best time to take it. Completing an ILP with a practitioner may also help to strengthen the client's confidence in the

practitioner, and alleviate some anxiety by having a plan and knowledge of resources and activities which correspond to the career problem (Sampson et al. 2003). Some items included on the ILP may be assigned as homework if deemed suitable by client and practitioner. For example, a practitioner may have the client complete an assessment between sessions so as to save in-session time for processing the results.

Step Six: Execute Individual Learning Plan

In this step, the client fulfills the obligations of his or her ILP with the support and guidance of the practitioner. The ILP should be routinely reviewed to track the client's progress as they works towards meeting their goals. Client versions of the CIP Pyramid and CASVE cycle, available at http://www.career.fsu.edu/techcenter/practitioner/index.html, can also be reviewed to teach problem solving skills and monitor decision making progress (Sampson et al, 2003).

Step Seven: Summative Review and Generalization

The final step in this sequence is to discuss the client's progress regarding accomplishment of the established goals, and the completion of the Individual Learning Plan. A concluding review of the CIP Pyramid of Information Processing Domains and the CASVE cycle is used to discuss how the initial gap was narrowed, assign follow-up activities, and facilitate use of problem-solving and decision-making skills that can be applied to future issues that the client may face (Sampson et al., 2003). Once an assessment has been completed and interpreted, the career practitioner should discuss with the client where s/he is in the decision making process. Did things become clearer, or muddier? Would they like to complete a different assessment, explore career information, talk to someone in a specific occupation, or engage in a different activity? Has the gap closed or widened? What is the next step? Do they need to

continue to meet with the career practitioner, or can they manage the next step on their own? These are questions that might be helpful to be explored during this stage.

Zunker Model for Using Career Assessments

A second model for using career assessments was designed by Zunker and includes four major steps: Analyzing Needs, Establishing the Purpose of Testing, Determining the Instruments, and Utilizing the Results (Osborn & Zunker, 2011). The process is described as a continuous cycle due to the spontaneous manner in which new client needs and assessment needs can arise at any point during counseling sessions. Earlier steps may need to be revisited before a career decision can be made. When deciding on which assessment tool to use and how much support to provide, practitioners should keep in mind the client's level of readiness for making a career choice and complexity of the individual's life, as well as the client's level of career maturity or basic status data (Osborn et al., 2011). Intake data can be collected using a variety of inventories and sources such as interviews, value inventories, biographical data, and life role importance questionnaires. This data can then be used to guide the creation of developmental intervention strategies.

In this section, we presented two separate models for integrating career assessments. In the next section, we turn our attention to applying these models of integrating the use of career assessment to a case study.

Case Study Application

Initial Interview. Kayla walked into a career center where she hoped to find help with her problem: that she had been unhappy in her job as a bank teller for a while, but she wasn't sure what she wanted to next or even whether she wanted to leave her current job. First, the career practitioner, Harvey, welcomed Kayla to the center and suggested they get to know each other a

bit. They exchanged favorite books, vacation spots, and where each of them grew up. As this helped Kayla relax, Harvey then asked her to explain a bit more about what had been occurring in her life that brought her in for career counseling. Dave worked to establish trust and develop the therapeutic relationships through displaying a genuine interest in getting to know her and in hearing about her career concerns.

Analyzing Needs/Preliminary Assessment/Defining Problem and Analyzing Causes. Following some talk of her job history and life circumstances, Kayla began to open up, explained that she felt trapped by her current job and didn't see herself having a fulfilling career within the banking industry. She started the job because her father thought it was a safe career that would offer stability and happiness. Harvey explained that everyone's career needs were different and the importance of understanding Kayla's own ideas of what she wants her career to look like. Kayla continually interjected feelings of worthlessness, being unable to decide, and being incredibly anxious about choosing a career for the rest of her life. Kayla even had difficulty saying what she was interested.

Establishing the Purpose of Testing/Formulating Goals. After analyzing Kayla's needs, Harvey discussed the possibility of completing a career assessment with her. Harvey collaboratively attempted to establish the purpose of the testing with Kayla. They agreed that she did not know her interests regarding the world of work as she relied on her father's guidance in making career decisions. They also agreed that Kayla appeared to possess a significant number of dysfunctional career thoughts and that the negative messages she internalized were contributing to her feelings of being stuck.

Determining the Instruments. Harvey and Kayla were now at the point where they needed to determine which instruments would be of greatest use to Kayla. First, Harvey suggested that

they use a measure of negative, or dysfunctional career thoughts to get a better understanding of all the negative statements that might be contributing to her career concerns. They decided that Kayla would take the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996a) to assess her negative career thoughts. Harvey explained that in knowing more specifically which thoughts were acting as barriers, they would be able to work on changing them. Also, to address her lack of knowledge about her own interests in the world of work, an interest inventory like the Self-Directed Search (SDS; Holland, 1994) could provide useful information about how Kayla's interests aligned with the interests of others in particular occupations. Kayla completed the CTI at the end of session, giving the practitioner time to review it prior to the next session. It was also decided that Kayla would complete the SDS before the next time they met and they would go over the results together.

  Utilizing the Results. Harvey and Kayla examined the results of her CTI and found that she had very high levels of external conflict. Kayla agreed that her family had dictated her career path and she was consumed with fear that if she deviated from this path, she would lose their love and support. Harvey expressed compassion for her fears and suggested that an intervention such as the Career Thoughts Inventory Workbook (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996b) might be useful in helping Kayla confront those fears and reframe them into more positive thoughts. Kayla hoped that by reframing her thoughts and thinking differently, she could stop letting her parents' choices for her be a barrier to choosing her own path. Next, Harvey and Kayla used the results of the SDS to examine her interests, which lay predominantly in the social realm. Harvey had Kayla read through the description of the *Social* type, which includes interests such as helping, teaching and counseling. Kayla strongly agreed with the descriptions given as being similar to her, and Harvey asked if she had any examples from her

life that would fit into this category. Kayla said she wanted to be a nurse when she was a little girl and would pretend to help "ill" friends. She hadn't realized how much she still wanted that dream because her parents told her she couldn't do it.

Developing and Executing the Individual Learning Plan/Summative Review and Generalization. Finally, as their time together was coming to a close, Kayla expressed her fear that she wouldn't know what to do with this new knowledge. Harvey introduced her to an Individual Learning Plan: a grid in which she could write down specific, concrete steps she needed to take to reach her goal of going to nursing school. Working together, they identified researching nursing pre-requisites and application dates, talk to an admissions practitioner at the nursing school, and used her knowledge of finance to make a financial plan to get her through school. Harvey explained that Kayla could add as many other items to the list as she needed, and they could include steps like, "Talk to mom and dad about changing my career." Harvey encouraged her to write down a specific date by which each item should be completed. Kayla left hopeful about the future and feeling she may have options available to her as a result of the career assessments and counseling. Harvey encouraged her to return if she had any questions about completing the ILP or additional career concerns.

Implications for Career Service Practitioners

Career assessments, whether quantitative or qualitative in nature, continue to play an important role in the career counseling process. We've come a long way from the time of "test and tell" and recognize that the decision to use an assessment should be integrated within the overall career counseling process. Based on the information provided above, several specific implications for career service practitioners can be derived. First, as practitioners, we should have a rationale for if, when, and how a career assessment would be appropriate. Sometimes,

clients will approach a career practitioner with a desire to "take a test" because someone knew took one or because of their expectations of what happens during a career session. We must also be willing to acknowledge when a career assessment might not be appropriate. For example, if they are in the step of comparing two options, taking an inventory to expand options might slow down the process. If they insist, it could be indicative of some perfectionistic thinking or some fear of committing to an option.

Secondly, career testing should be one intervention within a comprehensive approach to career counseling. The models presented here demonstrate how career assessments are not meant to be a stand-alone activity, but are intended to enhance the discussion through clarifying self-knowledge, identifying barriers, and expanding options. Thirdly, if an assessment is warranted, the career practitioner should provide an orientation to the assessment, check in during the process (to see if there are questions, concerns or frustrations), and follow up afterwards (with interpretation and determining next steps). Fourthly, during the discussion, the career practitioner must purposely try to maintain balance in the discussion of the results. It's very easy to slip into "expert mode" as all the scales and subscales are interpreted. We must make sure to watch non-verbal behaviors of our clients, to gauge when we are giving too much information. Asking general processing questions such as "What are your thoughts about your results?" or "What's your reaction to what I just shared?" can help balance the conversation.

Finally, career practitioners should aim to stay current on the career assessments that exist, as well as ethical guidelines, research and ongoing discussions about career assessments and their integration into career counseling sessions. Professional associations such as the National Career Development Association (ncda.org) and the Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling outline ethical guidelines for the use of career assessments. Professional journals

such as the *Journal of Career Assessment* provide research on the use of various career assessments in career development, while ongoing discussions among professionals can be found in LinkedIn groups, such as the "Career Assessment" closed group.

Summary

Career assessments provide a useful way to understand a client's interests, values and skills, identify negative career thoughts, and to expand options related to their self-knowledge. Career service practitioners begin the assessment process with the first words in the first session. We are constantly assessing and re-assessing the client's concern and the context of that concern, including the potential benefits and drawbacks to potential interventions. If we fully consider how a particular assessment relates to the client's career need, we can have greater confidence in the efficaciousness of that intervention.

References

Betz, N. E., & Borgen, F. H. (2009). Comparative effectiveness of CAPA and FOCUS online: Career assessment systems with undecided college students. Journal of Career Assessment, 17, 351-366. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1069072709334229

Brown, S. D., Ryan Krane, N. E. (2000). Four (or five) sessions and a cloud of dust: Old assumptions and new observations about career counseling. S. D. Brown, R. W. Lent (Eds.), Handbook of counseling psychology (3rd ed.) 740-766, Wiley, New York

Chartrand, J. M., Robbins, S. B., & Morrill, W. H. (1989). *The Career Factors Inventory. Concord, Ontario: 2000 Career/LifeSkills Resources.*

Farley, R. C., Johnson, V. A., & Parkerson, S. S. (1999). Effects of a career assessment and planning intervention on the vocational development of secondary students with disabilities: A pilot study. *Vocational Evaluation & Work Adjustment Journal, 32*, 15-21.

Hirschi, A., Freund, P. A., & Herrmann A. (2013). Development and validation of a measure of proactive career behaviors. *Journal of Career Assessment, 22,* 575-594. DOI: 10.1177/1069072713514813

Holland, J. L., Daiger, D. C, & Power, P. G. (1980). *My Vocational Situation.* Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Kerr, B. (1993). Career assessment for gifted girls and women. *Journal of Career Assessment, 1*, 258-266. Doi: 10.1177/106907279300100305

Osborn, D. S., Howard, D. K., & Leierer, S. J. (2007). The effect of a career development course on the dysfunctional career thoughts of racially and ethnically diverse college freshmen. *Career Development Quarterly, 55,* 365-377.

Osborn, D. S., & Zunker, V. G. (2011). *Using assessment results for career development* (8th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Osipow, S. H. (1987). *Manual for the Career Decision Scale.* Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.

Peterson, G. W., Sampson, J. P., Jr., Lenz, J. G., & Reardon, R. C. (2002). Becoming career problem solvers and decision makers: A cognitive information processing approach. In D. Brown (Ed.), *Career choice and development* (4th ed., pp. 312-369). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Reardon, R. C., & Lenz, J. G. (1999). Holland's theory and career assessment. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 55, 102-113.

Sampson, J. P., Jr., Peterson, G. W., Lenz, J. G., Reardon, R. C., & Saunders, D. E. (1996). *Career Thoughts Inventory*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc.

Sampson, J. P., Jr., Peterson, G. W., Reardon, R. C., & Lenz, J. G. (2000). Using readiness
assessment to improve career services: A cognitive information processing approach. *The
Career Development Quarterly, 49,* 146-174.

Sampson, J.P., Peterson, G. W., Reardon, R. C., & Lenz, J. G. (2003). Key elements of the CIP
approach to designing career services. *Center for the Study of Technology in Counseling
and Career Development*. Retrieved from
http://www.career.fsu.edu/documents/cognitive%20information%20processing/Key%20
Elements.htm

Sampson, J. P., Jr., Reardon, R. C., Peterson, G. W., & Lenz, J. G. (2004). *Career counseling
and services: A cognitive information processing approach*. Pacific Grove, CA:
Brooks/Cole.

Whiston, S. C. (2002). Application of the principles: Career counseling and interventions. *The
Counseling Psychologist, 30,* 218-237.

Wood, C., & Hayes, D. C. (Eds.). (2013). A *counselor's guide to career assessment instruments, 6th
Ed*. Broken Arrow, OK: National Career Development Association.

Zanskas, S., & Strohmer, D. C. (2010). Rehabilitation counselor work environment: Examining
congruence with protypic work personality. Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 53, 143–
152. doi: 10.1177/0034355209359812.