Theoretical Foundations – Career Development

Such “job specialization” is so logical that we accept the idea almost without question. However, when we so glibly adopt that concept we must face a further set of questions: Why was a) a hunter instead of a fisher, a toolmaker, a warrior, a healer, or a chieftain? Our speculation can lead us in many directions: (a) Did A have special characteristics such as strength, endurance, or agility that suggested A might be more successful as a hunter than B, C, or D? (b) Did A's family “own the franchise” for hunting, thus limiting the competition? (c) Did A have access to the special secrets or tools of earlier hunters (his father's, perhaps)? (d) Was the tradition of “like father, like son” so strong that everyone always assumed that A would be a hunter? (e) Did the changing needs of the group suddenly require more hunters than had previously been the case? (f) Who decided that A would a hunter--A himself, his family, the whole group, a special committee respected elders, or did it just “happen” without an overt decision? Unfortunately, these are difficult questions to answer.

The issues we have just raised about our mythical A could be asked again and again as we contemplate the relationship between every individual who has lived since those early times and his or her work. Throughout history, career development has been subjected to powerful pressures or influences that can still be observed today. In much of today's world one student sees occupational membership determined by such factors as social status, family tradition, and societal needs. On the other hand, some opportunities for choice have also existed over the years. For example, Benjamin Franklin in his Autobiography*, reports an interesting event when, on his twelfth birthday (in 1718), he and his father visited the shops of several craftsmen to explore the possibilities of Benjamin's apprenticeship. The choice c - printer-- was soon consummated.

The idea that the individual can exercise some choice in his or her career development, nevertheless, is primarily a product of this century, and mostly of very recent decades. Bandura (1974) suggests that human freedom can be defined as the availability of options and the right to exercise those options. This concept appears to be most prevalent within western democratic societies, but even there it encounters frequent challenge. However the extension of democratic ideals to increased concern for alleviation of poverty, increased emphasis on access to opportunities for employment; minority and alienated groups, and broader attention to participatory democracy suggest the likelihood that more opportunities will become available to more individuals. Since the career counselor is basically concerned with helping each client identify appropriate and possible options and to make decisions and plans for exercising those options, the counselor is already committed to this concept of human freedom.

Practical Knowledge

All professions and crafts, as well as many other occupations, require a mastery of pertinent theoretical and practical knowledge. The physician needs to know the theoretical aspects of biology, chemistry, and physics along with the practical side of anatomy, enzymology, optics, and sound conduction. The automobile mechanic must understand the theories of physics related to internal combustion, hydraulics, and electricity as well as the practical knowledge of strength of metals, heat transference, and friction reduction. To understand either a malfunctioning liver or a faulty steering mechanism one must know how these units operate normally, how they interact with other units, how the operation of the part can be influenced or changed, and how to obtain the information needed to understand the present problem. It is then possible to analyze the available data, identify possible alternatives, estimate the results likely to be produced by each option, evaluate the desirability of each result, and choose a tentative course of action.

Individuals preparing to enter the helping professions often overlook the importance of thorough grounding in both theory and knowledge. They are so concerned with building skill that they overlook the theoretical base that suggests or justifies that skill. That theoretical framework provides the basis for understanding the client, the client's problem, and possible courses of action.

Shertzer and Stone (1980) have listed four functions of theories approbate to our discussion. First, they suggest, a theory summarizes and generalizes a body of information, permitting the user to organize material into a meaningful system. Second, a theory facilitates understanding and explanation of complex phenomena; thus the user has a basis for developing insight into complicated situations and their causes. Third, a theory serves a predictive function by providing a basis for estimating what will happen under certain conditions. Fourth, a theory stimulates further research and fact finding by assuming positions that are testable. As further research is conducted the
Fourth, a theory stimulates further research and fact finding by assuming positions that are testable. As further research is conducted the theory is refined, extended, and completed.

The physical and biological sciences, and their related professions such as engineering and medicine, have benefited from centuries of theory-building and subsequent research. The behavioral sciences are still in their infancy in this aspect, except in areas where roots can be traced back to those early developing physical and biological sciences. This dearth of a well-developed and substantial theoretical base that is widely accepted by all professionals is a major problem in our area of concern. Several factors contribute to our lack of a solid theoretical base, including the brief period of time that career development has been studied, the impact on career patterns of vast social change occurring in the past half-century, and the lack of sophistication in basic disciplines such as psychology and sociology by career counselors and counselor educators. Although the professional literature of the past two or three decades has included much material dealing with career choice and career development, most authorities would concur with the view that our theoretical base is still sketchy and incomplete. Carkhuff, Alexik, and Anderson (1967) state that each presently existing theory of career choice has certain theoretical shortcomings.

It is very easy to assume either of two opposite positions concerning our present theoretical status. One can contend, like Warnath (1975), that our theories of career development are relevant for a continually decreasing number of individuals and that the needs of individuals are in direct conflict with the needs of our economic system, which produces the jobs people fill. He further contends that most people see no confirmation of their worth in the work they perform and that counselors should focus on helping individuals find that sense of worth in areas other than paid employment. Osipow (1983), on the other hand, states that even incomplete theory is better than none at all. He says that counselors and teachers are confronted continually with clients and students who are attempting to make choices and decisions; thus if help is to be provided, a basis for action is required. Without some theoretical base, the counselor is limited to sympathetic listening.

Human Dignity

There is much truth in Warnath's position. Many work settings provide little opportunity for worker satisfaction, many employers have little interest in the worker as a person rather than as a laborer, and society often emphasizes the production of goods and services rather than the recognition of human dignity. Further, there are many individuals who, for various reasons, view involvement with work in a passive, accepting way taking whatever job comes their way and drifting with the tide. Satisfaction come primarily from extracurricular activities such as weekend camping, the bowling league, or a hobby. Career counseling has little to offer the individuals. There are many others, however, who feel a desire for self direction, who want to make choices about what they do, how they live, who they are. Of these, some will seek or need help in making choice building plans, acting on decisions, and for these clients the skilled care counselor can provide assistance that is honest, meaningful, and facilitative.

Even though the theories of career counseling are presently incomplete, they do offer us the best and only guidelines that we have. As Osipow states, theory precedes and accompanies empirical knowledge and orients; while it is developing. Hewer (1963) similarly suggests that many so-called theories are more truly position papers prepared for discussion and criticism by colleagues. We will use the term theory loosely, referring usually to the position or point of view of the proponent and accepting the idea that the statement may be incomplete, sometimes inconsistent, often still unproven. The reader is encouraged to consider the various viewpoints from a pragmatic frame of reference that asks such questions as these: Does this help me understand human behavior? Does this provide a means for helping a client become more self-understanding and self-directing? Does this offer a better chance for estimating the future? Further, no theory is now so well developed that a counselor can afford to "buy into" or become a disciple of a single viewpoint, eschewing all others. Rather, the counselor is required to build a personal theory, accepting part of this one, a dash of that one, and possibly most of two or three others.

The primary effort is directed toward looking at several major positions on career development, with only sufficient detail to provide the reader a base for understanding the essential ingredients of each theory. The reader who desires more extensive coverage than our limited space permits has several options available. Books by Osipow (1983) and Pietrofessa and Splete (1975) give excellent summaries of the writings of the major theorists. Publications by Weinrach (1979), Herr and Cramer (1984), and Crites (1981) also give up-to-date summaries of the major writers. Whiteley and Resnikoff (1972) have edited a monograph in which several major theorists have

Ultimately, the reader must turn to the statements of the theorists themselves for a detailed view of what that writer proposes.