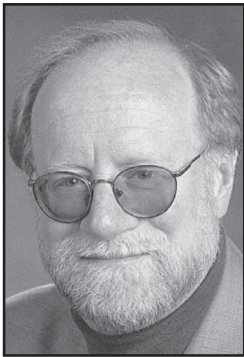# Career identity in a turbulent world

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Abstract

This article reviews some of the reasons for the turbulence in the recently globalised economy. The article provides a backdrop and advocacy for counselors assisting their clients in the development of a well articulated career identity. The purpose of the article is to provide educators, school counselors, and career counselors with the tools for assisting clients in the development of their career identity that will serve to deepen their career and life planning process. Recommendations for using more relational paradigms in the development of a career identity are suggested.

Keywords: Career counseling; career identity; genograms; identity; relational paradigms; retrospective questionnaires; sound bites; vocational hope; work

These are the best of times, the worst of times, and the most anxious of times. In the United States there are justifiable grounds for this level of anxiety and gloom. The housing market is in disarray, the United States dollar has fallen to new lows against the euro, petroleum products are at an all-time high, and the globalisation of work has led to increasing fears of unemployment. In 2008 there is even the quagmire of a looming recession amidst the overbearing consequences of the war in Iraq. Enormous disparity still exists in earning potential between different multicultural

groups due to diminished employment opportunities, discrimination, and the denial of equal educational opportunities. All this leads to fear and uncertainty about the standards of living in the United States along with the future of work as the citizens know it, not to mention the unthinkable prospect of terrorism.

Massive social changes are also taking place due to a variety of factors: national and global migration, the aging of the work force, and the decreasing options to save social security. Dual career families are commonplace and there is an entire literature on the effect this is having on families and family time (Stevens *et al*., 2007).

Even without this list and unfortunately dismal litany of worrisome trends, Johnson (2008) reminds us that almost forty years ago these changes began with the transformation of the United States from an industrial-based to a service-based economy. This resulted in the progressive elimination of traditional assembly line arrangements in factories inhabited by well paid workers, almost always protected by union membership. Within the old industrial-based society, secure jobs were the norm for both college and non-college graduates alike. In contrast, today even large companies can be sold overnight on the floor of any of the major international stock exchanges and the next day they do not exist. They can also go bankrupt, giving their employees one day's notice as was the case recently with the US airlines, ATA and Aloha.

Wolch and Dear (1993) explain that the conversion from an industrial-based to a service based economy came about because of a number of radical changes that occurred in both finance and trade. Changes in the international exchange rates and traditional monetary systems created incentives for American manufacturers to relocate their factories to other countries. At the same time foreign imports were less expensive for the American citizenry, speeding up the closing of American factories because of the decline in the demand for the more expensive goods they produced. Meanwhile American factories were closing their doors; the economic changes fostered new terms such as "outsourcing" and "off-shoring."

To be sure the new service economy created jobs. However, unlike the industrial-based economy, the bulk of the new service sector jobs were minimum wage, representing a move from "Fordism" to "McDonaldsism". This had and continues to have massive implications for large numbers of non-college graduates along with those with limited training and skills. Accompanying the decline of strong unions and union-protected work, employers offered workers more part-time jobs, fewer fringe benefits, and little or no job security. Reflecting on reports issued by the United States Department of Labor, Johnson (2008) notes that changes such as these were important factors contributing to rates of long-term joblessness among traditional blue collar workers.

These examples and brief history demonstrate that educators, counselors, psychologists, and other human services providers engaged in career education, career counseling or career development work have quite a challenge in front of them. They are all professionally obligated to make sense of this rapidly changing and taxing environment. This new work environment is currently showing increasing shifts in the demands for workers with the most current skills in fields such as information technology (IT) and finance. Meanwhile there are precipitous alterations in local and national demographics which expose more problems. While employment may be available, there are not enough trained workers for the new job structuring taking place. An example is the health sector. In the United States it is popularly known that 78 million baby boomers will reach the age of 65 in the year 2011. This will result in the need for bold initiatives to give first aid to a health care system that is woefully shorthanded and potentially powerless to provide appropriate services. Health training programs have not enrolled the numbers of students needed to address this shortage; and there will need to be new plans to recruit and retain provider specialists interested in gerontological problems and issues.

In addition newer jobs in the service sector (McDonalds, Wal-Mart, Jiffy Lube) not only are low paying but are, unfortunately, often replete with tasks that are uninspiring and

unchallenging resulting in workers not gaining job tenure. So there is great job turnover in service professions which obviously affects service system provision for consumers. Finally, the newest generation of educated and well trained workers has purportedly higher self-expectations, wants promotions more quickly and wants to have salaries to be commensurate with their often unfounded fantasies of what they believe they are worth.

Career identity

Some of the issues described above may be confronted by counselors and educators by helping students and clients to develop a career identity. The creation of an identity that serves the purpose of engaging in meaningful work is arguably the most essential ingredient for everyone seeking employment. It is an especially important element for those who need to meet the challenges of today's workplace.

Chope (2000) pointed out some time ago that career identity is a psychological concept that is rather complex but enormously useful in a rapidly changing climate. Curiously workers often do not differentiate between a job that they have or want, a career that they are in the process of developing or a vocational calling that is imbued with their visions of success. Still everyone who wants to have a meaningful work or career experience needs to distinguish between the job, the career, and the calling and should be able to do so with the assistance of counselors, mentors, family members, or teachers. With the construction of a meaningful career identity through education, counseling, or other significant relationships, American workers have an increase in their work-related maneuverability especially in the face of unemployment.

A career identity can be the umbrella for the job, the career, and the calling. Chope (2000) suggested that a career identity is the "Kernel of all that you hope to be or become, the nucleus of your workplace confidence. It represents the accrual and integration of your experience, skills, interests, values, and personality characteristics" (58). It fosters greater exploration toward appropriate jobs and career choices and it elicits a commitment to career choices that are made. The career identity can serve as the equation for defining oneself and the means by which income will be generated in the work world.

The concept of career identity has a base in Erik Erikson's (1968) treatise on the subject of identity and psychosocial development. Personal exploration through the assistance of significant others leads to the creation of a sense of who we are and what we can become. Marcia (1980) in a vein similar to that of Erikson offered a series of stages or identity statuses that individuals need to pass through in creating a stable identity. These included stages of little exploration or commitment (diffusion), stages of commitment without appropriate exploration (foreclosure), exploration without commitment (moratorium), and commitment based upon exploration (achievement).

Research in career identity

There have been several interesting pieces of new research directed at career identity development. They demonstrate the importance of a person's overall career vision, or knowing which path has the greatest potential for meaning and economic success. Nauta and Kahn (2007), for example, used 31 male and 80 female students at a large Midwestern United States university to show the relationship between work identity status and interests. They found that more advanced career identity status dimensions were associated with higher career decision self-efficacy and a greater differentiation of interests. When interest differentiation was conceptualised as the difference between a person's highest and lowest Holland interest scores, high versus low differentiation in interests was negatively associated with foreclosure, or commitment with a lack of self-exploration. Conceivably if students made a commitment to a career identity with little self-exploration, their interests were more diffuse. Moreover, since

career identity is also associated with greater career decision self-efficacy; it can give direction to new learning or continuing education and training that can reinforce or enhance the career identity.

This research supports Erikson's and Marcia's suggestions that the exploration of interests is a necessary ingredient in their development. It is certainly a place of professional practice where counselors and classroom educators might assist.

Diemer and Blustein (2007) offer a refreshing twist to career identity by suggesting that a new construct, "vocational hope" be considered in the mix. The authors, responsive to the few career assessment tools appropriate for urban adolescents, explored the component structure of three indices of career development with a sample of 115 females and 105 males. These indices were vocational identity assessed by My Vocational Situation (MVS), career commitment measured by the Career Commitment Measure (CCM), and work salience, assessed by the Work Role Salience Scale (WRSS). Their analyses produced a four component solution (connection to work, vocational identity, commitment to chosen career, salience of chosen career). They pointed out that remaining connected to a vocational future or inculcating vocational hope, especially with countless barriers and pressure to disconnect, is an important consideration for career counselors and educators working with urban adolescents. Diemer and Blustein suggested that counselors provide new psychosocial and career development interventions that facilitate vocational hope. They also suggested that a new measure of the construct of vocational hope be considered for development.

Palladino Schultheiss (2007) has suggested that a relational cultural paradigm is needed to understand the major influences in the creation of vocational identity. She has summarized the recent research at the 26th International Congress of Applied Psychology in Athens, Greece suggesting that family variables like parental attitudes and expectations, communication, parenting style, attachment and separation, social support, and the work values of the family all play a role in vocational identity as well as the ability to make reasonably good vocational decisions. The work of Palladino Schultheiss in a sense levelled the playing field by demonstrating that there are individual and collectivist explanations for vocational choices and identity. Friends, relatives, significant others, along with teachers, counselors and coaches all have a role.

Other researchers have suggested that the family be given much more focus in understanding career decision-making and life planning and identity (Blustein, Walbridge, Friedlander & Palladino, 1991). Blustein (2001) laid out a road map for future research and the creation of a new knowledge base regarding the influence of relational paradigms. He called for research into three domains:

1. What are the ways in which work and relationships intersect?
2. What theoretical frames can be used to conceptualise the intersection?
3. What methods should be used to engage in further exploration of these questions?

Winslade (2007) in a tone that is reflective of Diemer and Blustein, (2007) draws attention to the enormous potential power of relationships in shaping identity. In describing the K-12 educational experience he notes that children and adolescents are authoritatively ascribed with particular identity characteristics. They are characterised as smart or dull, princes or putzes, behavioural problems or perfect angels, often based on particular comparative test scores or the social norms and expectations of the teacher, family or community that the students reside in. So Winslade poses a particular challenge, suggesting that the role of the career counselor might be characterised as an individual who can promulgate the release of "inner potential, talents, aptitudes or abilities and to find a rational match for those in the real world" (55).

Engaging and releasing the inner potential may be difficult. Students not only follow their own path, but the path that is set out for them by their parents and family members. Their road is often influenced by the relationships that they have established with others.

As any school or career counselor knows, this connection to family can be a double-edged sword. Students hurt when they have disappointed or shamed family members. Wendy Wasserstein's experience illustrates this point. When she won the Pulitzer Prize for The Heidi Chronicles, her mother commented that she wished that she were celebrating Wendy's wedding instead (Aron, 2003). Obviously comments like that, especially at the celebration of a career high point, can make anyone feel that no matter the accomplishment, if it is not consistent with the family agenda, it does not count. For many, the first career development task is to hurdle the family acceptability threshold.

How school and career counselors can help

There are methods of confronting these unfortunate ascriptions. Two areas often neglected by school and career counselors alike could be used. First, counselors could assist in developing a well articulated career identity. Second, counselors could understand how the family of origin affects the process of students' deciding upon a career path. Along this scheme counselors might determine how family members might be better utilised to assist in their students' career development.

The remainder of this article is to provide educators, school counselors, and career counselors with several counseling tools and interventions that deepen the entire career and life-planning process in efficient and systematic ways. With new techniques, counselors can understand how family background, history, mobility, support, conflicts, nurturing, exposure to new ideas or protection from them affect the process of creating a career identity that will determine what students choose to do in their work lives.

Using a more holistic approach, every helping official may engage family members as partners in a collaborative career-planning process. As pointed out elsewhere (Chope, 2006) clients and counselors do not need to do this work in a vacuum. Using family members and significant others to assist in the process could be wonderfully beneficial to the career counseling process.

What are the ways that career identity development can be understood?

Genograms

Much personal and work identity is rooted in the family and to understand the origins of one's identity, it is important to look at the harbinger of identity in the family. The career genogram (Okiishi, 1987), a type of occupational family tree, is undeniably the most commonly recognised and frequently administered qualitative instrument for gathering information about the influence of the family in career identity and decision-making. As a postmodern and meaning-making tool, it allows for the understanding of career decision-making and identity-building in the context of the family (Dagley, 1984).

Many authors have suggested incorporating family influence into the career counseling process. However, counselors have been limited by a lack of models, protocols or techniques to gather the most suitable information. The career genogram was an early remedy for this dilemma and career counselors were provided with a reasonably well defined technique that could be used to understand the influence of the immediate and extended family. It can also be effortlessly used in a classroom project and is now the subject matter of courses in both career development and family therapy in the United States. As homework, it can straightforwardly be completed outside of class time. Significant others are also useful for assistance in the creation of genograms.

The genogram informs the exploration of current as well as historical, multigenerational career development patterns. The roles, behaviours, and attitudes of family members along with

unfulfilled goals and "non events" that specific family members had, can be prospected with this tool. Family patterns of all types can be pointed out and the pressures of differential family standards can be discussed.

Creating a family genogram demands that the client gather pertinent information from other family members; parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles can all play a role. Families of origin and extended families can add a rich perspective to a client's particular strengths and weaknesses. In creating a career identity understanding personal development from the perspective of different family members sharing a common ancestry gives an uncanny, genetic view of the opportunities available.

The best method of creating a genogram is to first explain the purpose of the genogram to clients or students and then gather historical information. Genograms are unstandardised, so there are many distinctive ways of constructing them. Currently there are over 10 000 genogram web sites available on the internet identified by simply "googling" the word genogram. After the genogram is completed a number of questions can be asked as suggested by Chope (2006) and Dagley (1984).

> What family patterns exist?
> Which family members had a clearly formed work identity?
> Which family member's identity did you most admire?
> Who did you identify with?
> Whose career aspirations are most similar to your own?
> Which person was most influential in the creation of your own career identity?
> What pressures do you feel when you compare yourself to any identity expectations your family had for you?
> What were the dominant values in the family?
> What ghosts or legend existed?
> Are there any family myths that transcended generations?
> What about family secrets?
> Are there any pressures that emanate from "unfinished business" in the family?
> What family interaction rules have been passed along?
> Who was vocal and who was silent?
> What can emerge from family legends and their effects?
> What are the pressures that each observes with regard to decision-making and economic status and position?
> What is the meaning of success?
> What are the boundaries?
> What are the family traditions?
> How did the family balance learning, working, and playing and how were these valued?

The genogram can elicit a substantial amount of information including the nature of an individual's decision making, power, political beliefs, anger, substance abuse, addictive behaviours, and emotional demands. The information extracted from the genogram permits a continuing exploration of family history and the themes that encompass the family. These can be used to assist in the development of an individual's identity.

Assessing family influence in career identity development with the genogram interfaces well with the current contextual approaches to career counseling. Career decision theory and practice has evolved beyond the epistemology of logical positivism developed by early career theorists to include contextual and relationship factors. Current career literature now reflects how researchers and practitioners have appreciated the family as a part of the career counseling process (Niles & Harris-Bowlesby, 2005).

Retrospective questionnaires

Amundson (1998) has created a unique approach to career counseling by inviting significant family members like parents and siblings into the counseling process to serve as observers. These significant others and family members are asked to give their thoughts and perspectives on the client's abilities, interests, and personal characteristics as these are related to the work world. Amundson has also involved significant others from First Nation communities (McCormick & Amundson, 1997) in a manner that is similar to what Blustein (2001) has suggested. When significant others, family members, or community members are unavailable to be included in the counseling process, information is obtained by eliciting feedback on the following questionnaire (Amundson, 1998, 172).

1. What would you say this person is good at? What skills has this person demonstrated?
2. What would you see as this person's major interest areas?
3. How would you describe the personal characteristics of this person?
4. What positive changes have you noticed over time in this person, especially in relation to work or looking for work?
5. In what ways could this person improve?
6. If you were to suggest the ideal job or career prospects for this person, what would it be?

Amundson suggests that the career counselor work with the client to decide who would be among the best choices to provide this information. Evaluative information, perceptions, fantasies, and family myths can all be extracted from the information provided.

Chope's family protocol

Using variables from professional experience as well as relevant research on relational influences (Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi & Manzi, 2001; Phillips, Christopher-Sisk & Gravino, 2001) Chope (2006) developed the following instrument for practitioners to use while gathering family influence data. Through helpful comments and feedback from colleagues, the questionnaire was honed down to six primary questions with follow-up inquiries made to questions 1-3 and 6. The instrument is used to elicit important information from a client's history and adds to a constructivist strategy for gathering, organising and understanding family context data.
The questions follow, each inviting a different type of exploration.

1. What kind of career-related information did the family provide?
    A. Did the family help generate different possibilities and new experiences?
    B. What alternatives did the family suggest regarding schools, training or careers? How did these affect you?
    C. What was the family's impression of gender roles? How did these affect you?
    D. What family traditions or legends existed?
    E. Was there any "forced guidance", a tendency to push in a direction more reflective of the family's interests than yours?
2. What tangible assistance was provided and were there any strings attached?
    A. Were tuition, books, and supplies provided?
    B. Was transportation provided to attend school or get to a job
    C. Was housing provided or made available?
    D. Were incidentals taken care of?
    E. Was health insurance paid for until the age of 23?

3. What type of emotional support did the family provide?

        A. Was emotional support certain to be available, no matter what?

        B. Did the family take a hands-off but supportive approach?

        C. Was there subtle emotional pressure to pursue a particular path?

        D. Were you told by the family to "just be happy"?

        E. Were you told that your plans wouldn't amount to much?

        F. Who was supportive and who wasn't?

4. Were you concerned about the impact of your career choice on the family?

5. What disruptive family events affected you or other members of the family?

6. What were the actions of family members who were asked to help and actions of those who were not asked to help?

        A. Of those who were involved, which were welcomed and which were not?

        B. Of those who were asked to help, who offered assistance and who did not?

Counselors may notice that these questions point to the projected fantasies of the family and may outweigh the information base and realities of the job market. The questions inform counselors of the family's impressions of particular roles that men and women play in the workforce. The information can be used to assist in the development and refinement of a client's career identity.

What is clear from retrospective questionnaires is that hypotheses can evolve from the data that are presented and the subsequent client narratives that ensue. It is also clear that the retrospective questionnaire technique demands that the counselor or data gatherer be well skilled in asking follow-up questions.

Sound bites

From the gathering of information using techniques like those described above, a clearly articulated career identity can be reflected in thirty-second sound bites that clients use to describe themselves in meaningful work. Sometimes these are referred to as "elevator messages." Unfortunately, most people struggle with the creation of these sound bites. That is where counselors, teachers, and family members can assist. Young adults should be able to tell people who they are or aspire to be in the work world. A simple sound bite can be empowering and give meaning to work and passion for work activities. It can be developed relatively quickly but must be practiced so that it can become an easily available component of a job seeker's repertoire.

Umbrellas

A career identity should be the umbrella that has all of the components of working subsumed under it. The career identity is more than a job. It is the broad stroke that can define a variety of work and job-seeking activities. Consider this example. The first author of this article refers to himself as a psychologist. That serves as the umbrella characterising his identity. But he maintains five different income streams with the generic idea that his career or work identity is represented as a psychologist. He is a professor and department chair; he has also had a private practice for over thirty years; he has a consultation team that works in business and industry; he writes books and articles; and is a keynote speaker. There are constant fluctuations in the income streams of his work, but having a number of streams allows him to maintain employment self-protection. That is the position that many workers in other disciplines need to consider in addressing employment concerns or facing the downturns of unemployment in struggling economies. Having a career identity serves as a self-protective device.

Consider another example. As newspapers vanish, reporters must view themselves as generic communicators and seek out work in fields within communications, bypassing work in

the well focused journalistic fields that they were trained for. Corporate communications, business writing, blogging, speech writing, advertising copy and even radio and television work should be considered as potential positions for a person in communications.

As the new housing market dries up in the United States, builders must see themselves as highly flexible independent contractors and consider other income streams that are related to their independent building identity, including new homes, apartment remodels, landscaping, park design, and fountain creation. This may require new or continuing education but the larger identity will lead to greater work opportunities and more consistently meaningful work.

Why should this approach be taken now?

It does not take much searching, really, to find examples of the influence of the family on career planning and identity development. Mary Jacobsen (2000) wrote how the dreams of parents and caregivers, especially their unattained dreams, shape the career choices of their offspring.

Assessing family influence in career decision-making to assist in the creation of a career identity interfaces well with the current constructivist approaches to career counseling. Career decision theory and practice has evolved beyond the epistemology of logical positivism developed by early career theorists to include contextual and relationship factors. Current career literature now reflects how researchers and practitioners have appreciated the family and other relationships as a part of the career counseling process (Niles & Harris-Bowlesby, 2005).

The creation of a career identity and an understanding of the need that people have for relatedness also interface with Blustein's (2001) understanding of the role of work in the psychological health and well-being of people. He points out that work provides additional access to a relational world beyond the family. So why not use current relationships in the form of family members and significant others to begin to provide that access? Blustein also speaks to problems with social categorisation and stratification. Accordingly a well honed career identity may be a means by which individuals can confront stereotypes and create more positive ways of categorising themselves.

Summary and conclusions

There are enormous changes occurring in the work world brought about by economic globalisation. In addressing this phenomenon, teachers and counselors need to work with parents and their children to be able to offer them a process to cope with this changing work world. Teachers and counselors must also support children and clients in articulating their vision of their career futures. A well honed career identity has terrific implications for greater career decision-making self-efficacy and interest differentiation. Several methods were offered for counselors to assist their clients in creating a career identity.

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