CAREER COUNSELING CASE STUDY

by

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Presented in Fulfillment
Of the Requirements of COUN5279 – Life Planning and Career Development

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June 14, 2013
Abstract

This paper focuses on the case scenario of Naomi and addresses applicable theory, relationship strategies, the influences of diversity characteristics, biases and assumptions, career counseling models, ethical issues, an approach to career counseling, appropriate assessment tools, and the impact of disasters and crises. It can be seen in each section how career counseling would be very beneficial for Naomi and her future.
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**Introduction**

This project focuses on career counseling with Naomi, a single mother of three children, who is 26 years old. She is biracial, with Latina and African American heritage. She and her sister were raised by their mother and all three remain close. Naomi earned her GED and appears to be of low to average intelligence with a professional work ethic and moderate success and promotion in her jobs. She has health issues as well as having to deal with sick children that sometimes preclude her from being present at work. She has not attended college and primarily works in customer service roles earning approximately $30,000 annually.

Her two reasons for seeking out counseling at this time are to find a life partner in order to not feel so lonely and to no longer live paycheck to paycheck, and being able to handle unexpected expenses. Overall, she is looking for change in her life, but does not know how to go about creating said change and is currently feeling somewhat hopeless and directionless.

**Career Counseling Theory**

Zunker (2012) suggests movement towards the convergence of trait-and-factor methods and person-environment-fit (P-E Fit) constructs; this convergence will be applied to Naomi’s situation. Chartrand (2001) asserts that P-E Fit is an evolved and updated version of trait-and-factor theory, and they have many similarities. Zunker (2012) describes some of the guidelines of this combination of theories that make it an appropriate fit for Naomi’s situation. The first key guideline in this model is that counselors treat each client as a unique individual, which is important for Naomi, as her situation is not entirely typical. This model also considers job satisfaction and achievement needs, which both seem to be important to Naomi when considering a new career path. Work values are also considered when matching individuals and work environments; this is a particularly important consideration in Naomi’s situation as her
need for a steady income and flexibility around her children and personal health issues seem to be top priorities for her (Zunker). Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, and Shipp (2006) define P-E fit “as the match between the person and environment” (p. 802); they go on to describe possible reasons for a lack of matching between person and environment, such as pay falling short of expectations, abilities exceeding job requirements, and values not fitting that of the employer.

Both Zunker (2012) and Chartrand (2001) lay out a framework for their respective views of the P-E Fit theory; there are similarities and differences. Zunker’s model includes seven stages, each with specific objectives. The first stage is the intake interview, and includes goals such as establishing a collaborative counseling relationship, gathering background information, assessing emotional and cognitive status, and observing personality style (Zunker). The second stage is identifying developmental variables, such as self-perception and understanding of one’s environment, as well as environmental, gender, and cultural variables. Assessment is the third stage in the model described by Zunker; abilities, values, interests, and information-processing skills are assessed in this stage. The fourth stage is identifying and solving problems, while the fifth stage is generating a P-E Fit analysis based on cognitive schema, criteria for choices, and an optimal predication system. The sixth stage involves confirming, exploring and deciding, including investigating possible work environments, and making an informed decision; the final stage is follow-up, which involves progress evaluation and repeating the process if necessary (Zunker). Chartrand (2001) identifies three stages in utilizing P-E Fit; they include diagnostic appraisal, the counseling process, and counseling outcomes, each having similar objectives to Zunker’s model.

**Relationship Strategies**
The therapeutic relationship is critical to the success of the counseling process. If a counselor does not take the time to build rapport and develop a therapeutic relationship with a client, there is a strong possibility that the counseling process will be inhibited and progress will be stymied. Knapp (2007) outlines the imperative skills for effective therapeutic communication and relationships. The core communication skills needed to build a client-counselor relationship include listening, attending (both verbally and nonverbally), reflecting, summarizing, clarifying, prompting, and open-ended requests. Knapp writes, “rapport involves establishing and maintaining a meaningful and trustworthy connection” and “a safe and respectful environment” (p. 33). Thus when building rapport with clients and other stakeholders (such as coworkers or supervisors), it is important to consider the following: “quality of your voice, professionalism, sense of organization, patience, clarity, efficiency, attitude, attentiveness” and “your general appearance, demeanor, eye contact, and facial expressions” (p. 33) in order to develop the desired connection and environment. The primary competency needed in order to establish positive rapport is to always remember and recognize with genuineness and respect that counseling is all about the client and her “feelings, thoughts, actions, inactions… choices and outcomes” (Knapp, 2007, p. 34).

When considering building rapport specifically with Naomi, the multicultural model for ethnic women (specifically, the first step) as described by Zunker (2012) could be particularly useful in establishing the positive rapport mentioned previously while also taking Naomi’s culture into consideration. Zunker writes that along with building rapport, culturally appropriate relationships must also be developed. This would involve inviting discussion about the racial and worldview differences between the counselor (Caucasian) and Naomi (biracial) and the feelings Naomi may be experiencing due to these differences. Other key points include picking up
culturally specific cues Naomi may exhibit and reciprocating them, being patient with Naomi in building the relationship, respecting and appreciating the differences between Naomi and the counselor and respectfully asking for clarification in order to gain a better understanding of Naomi’s views and thoughts (Zunker).

**Influences of Diversity Characteristics**

When considering characteristics that can influence a counselor’s relationship with a client, gender, age, culture, and socioeconomic status (SES) must be contemplated. Being a female counselor, it does not seem like gender would be an influencing factor in the development of a therapeutic relationship with Naomi. Age is a little more difficult to assess as the counselor’s age is fairly close to that of the client; this could either make Naomi feel comfortable and willing to open up to the counselor or she could feel that a counselor who is not much older than she is either not experienced enough to be helpful or makes her feel inadequate in her own life because the counselor has accomplished more with her life in a similar amount of time.

Culture may be a strong influence in the development of the therapeutic relationship as the counselor is Caucasian and Naomi is biracial (Latina and African American). Zunker (2012) asserts that counselors should “recognize that there are different worldviews within cultural groups; each client must be approached as an individual” (p. 213). As a biracial individual, Naomi is truly unique and it is imperative that a counselor take the time to identify her unique worldview and not assume anything, such as she was raised by her mother so she probably identifies more with her Latina heritage, which may or may not be true. Arthur and McMahon (2005) write, “career counselors need to consider the unique perspectives of clients and how cultural forces have influenced their career-related needs” (p. 212).
Finally, when considering SES, it appears that Naomi would be considered working poor, as she works consistently but is still living paycheck to paycheck. This factor could influence the counseling relationship if Naomi harbors any resentment for or does not trust those with higher SES. By learning about Naomi as an individual and not stereotyping her, a counselor will have the highest probability of building an effective relationship with her; it is also important to recognize, validate, and ease any qualms she may have concerning working with an individual different from herself in many ways (Zunker, 2012).

**Biases and Assumptions**

Biases and assumptions on the part of the counselor can be very detrimental to the career counseling process if the counselor is not aware of them or does not take steps to resolve them. Biases and assumptions on the part of the client can make it very difficult for the counselor to build the rapport necessary for productive career counseling work. If the client holds biases and assumptions that are hindering the counseling process, the counselor must take the time to address these issues and dispute faulty beliefs when possible before proceeding with other work (Zunker, 2012). With regards to Naomi, she may have biases such as those previously discussed with age, race or SES. There are two techniques that could be beneficial in such a situation; one is broaching, which is defined as “a consistent and ongoing attitude of openness with a genuine commitment by the counselor to continually invite the client to explore issues of diversity” and a “vehicle for navigating a discussion concerning issues of difference related to race, ethnicity, and culture” between counselor and client (Day-Vines, Wood, Grothaus, Craigen, Holman, Dotson-Blake, & Douglas, 2007, p. 402). The multicultural model previously discussed uses a technique similar to broaching in inviting open conversation about differences in order to build rapport, and could be very beneficial in addressing any biases that the counselor or Naomi hold. The other,
Cultural auditing is a 13-step process of reflective counseling that provides “counselors with focused reflection about the influences of culture on their work with individual clients” (Collins & Arthur, 2005, p. 141 as cited by Collins, Arthur & Wong-Wylie, 2010).

**Career Counseling Models**

As previously discussed, the trait-and-factor and person-environment-fit convergence model will be utilized to address the challenges in Naomi’s case and hopefully produce positive outcomes, as it addresses job satisfaction, achievement needs, and work values such as income and flexibility, which are all important factors to Naomi (Zunker, 2012). The multicultural model for ethnic women will also be useful for working with Naomi, specifically in efforts to establish rapport and a culturally appropriate relationship as previously discussed (Zunker). Step three of this model, assessing the impact of cultural variables and step five, making culturally appropriate counseling interventions are both pertinent to multicultural counseling concerns and competencies. The major concepts of step three are identifying the most limiting of Naomi’s cultural factors as well as determining how the client makes decisions, i.e. individually or collectively as a family. Finally, step five involves using all of the cultural information gained in steps one through four to inform one’s choice of interventions such as involving key decision makers in the family (perhaps Naomi’s mother), allowing for ample time to complete tasks, and using racial and ethnically appropriate assessments (Zunker).

**Legal and Ethical Issues**

There are many sections of the National Career Development Association’s (NCDA, 2007) Code of Ethics that are relevant to Naomi and her situation, the following are a sampling and do not consider any action or event beyond the described case scenario. The first section is A.1.b, which defines and differentiates between career planning and career counseling; this is important
for Naomi, as it appears that she needs more than information and assistance in finding a job or a career, she has career and personal development concerns that are intertwined and should both be addressed. Section A.1.d states, “career professionals and their clients work jointly in devising integrated career services plans (in writing or orally) that offer reasonable promise of success and are consistent with the abilities and circumstances of clients” (NCDA, 2007, p. 5), thus the counselor has a responsibility to develop a plan for Naomi’s career development with her that is suitable to her situation and needs. The next section, A.1.e addresses the involvement of a client’s support network (i.e. family, friends, religious leaders) and how they can be a source of support and positive resource for the client (with her consent); it appears that Naomi is close to her mother and sister as well as active in her church and these could be beneficial connections for her in her career development.

The American Counseling Association’s (ACA, 2005) Code of Ethics, while not specific to career counseling does provide an inclusive ethical guide for counselors of all types. Section A.1.e states, “counselors work with their clients considering employment in jobs that are consistent with the overall abilities, vocational limitations, physical restrictions, general temperament, interest and aptitude patterns, social skills, education, [and] general qualifications” (ACA, 2005, p. 4). A.4.b and C.5 are both important to appropriately respecting Naomi as a diverse individual, in that counselors are not to impose their personal values on a client and they are to not discriminate “based on age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race, religion/spirituality, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status/partnership, language preference, [or] socioeconomic status” (ACA, p. 10). Finally, when using career assessments with Naomi, a counselor should only use those tests that she is trained in and competent and should use them appropriately with regards to scoring, interpretation and sharing of results with her (E.2.a & b).
Career Counseling Approach

When considering the process of career identification, and the steps of self-awareness, identification of skills and prioritization, the Career Diamond as well as Gottfredson’s developmental theory of occupational aspirations come to mind (Capella, 2013; Zunker, 2012). While Gottfredson’s theory is just that, a theory and not a model, the first major idea is the development of one’s self-concept, which is closely related to self-awareness and the first step of the Career Diamond model is expanding “a sense of self and a sense of the demand characteristics or the externals” (Capella, para. 4; Zunker). For Naomi, this means she will need to come to understand herself better, including her “appearance, abilities, personality, gender, values, and place in society” (Zunker, p. 55) and how these factors affect her behavior and worldview.

The next step, identification of skills can be achieved through assessments, both formal and informal with the client. This would be still considered part of the expansion step of the career diamond as it is part of what one must identify about one’s self in order to be able to identify potential career matches (Capella, 2013). In Gottfredson’s theory skill identification would be paired with images and cognitive maps of occupations that one holds (Zunker). For Naomi, it can be seen that she has a personal work ethic and succeeds in customer service type positions, which implies that she is personable and gets along with people. Through the use of assessments and interviewing, a counselor would be able to help Naomi identify other skills that will help her to identify possible career matches. The final step, prioritization is the second half of the career diamond or the narrowing process and Gottfredson’s concepts of social space, circumscription, and compromise apply (Capella; Zunker). With Regards to Naomi, she will need to take what she has learned about herself, skills and otherwise and use this knowledge to narrow her potential
careers down to the best fit for her.

**Assessment Tools**

The first assessment selected for Naomi would be the Career Counseling Checklist (as reproduced by Zunker, 2012); this assessment will allow the counselor to gain a better understanding of Naomi’s career concerns as well as to learn more about her and her thoughts. In reviewing the checklist, it appears there would be many items on it that would apply to Naomi and help the counselor have a better grasp on areas and issues that need to be addressed through counseling. Some that she would possibly check include, “I do not feel confident that I know in which areas my true interests lie,” “my physical ability may greatly influence my career choice,” “my ethnicity may influence my career choice,” “I have great difficulty making most decisions about my life,” “I don’t have any idea of what I want in life, who I am, or what’s important to me,” and “family responsibilities will probably limit my career ambitions;” these could then dictate how to proceed with Naomi (Zunker, pgs. 405 & 406). The next step could be administering an interest inventory, such as Holland’s Self-Directed Search in order to help her identify her personality type and possible occupational matches (Zunker).

**Impact of Disasters and Crises**

As it was mentioned that the client resides in Louisiana, one will assume for the purpose of discussing crises, emergencies, and disasters that a hurricane hit Louisiana and has caused a fair amount of turmoil in Naomi’s life. The hurricane caused major damage to Naomi’s place of employment and she has recently found out that the company may be relocating its customer service call center where she works to a different, less hurricane prone state. What started as a natural disaster has turned into a personal crisis for her, as she is concerned about losing her job and needing to find a job and source of income, which is taking away from the pursuit of a more
long-term career path. Her manager has also mentioned that she may be offered a position (with promotion) at the new call center but this would require moving to a new state and away from her family and support system for a job that is a steady source of income but not what she necessarily what she wants to continue doing in the long term. This disaster and resulting crisis appears to have had a huge impact on Naomi’s career planning and development as she is now completely focused on her immediate future and either moving or having to find a new job as soon as possible. These critical issues must be addressed and dealt with so that Naomi can feel secure in being able to provide for her children as she has been doing so that the focus can return to the more long term career planning and development that had been occurring prior to the hurricane. Zunker (2012) writes, “women who lose their jobs report a greater decline in general health than men do” (p. 285); it would seem possible that this would also be true for women who face the stress of possible job loss, and as Naomi already has health issues, job loss could exacerbate her existing issues as well as cause new ones.

**Conclusion**

NCDA (2007) defines career counseling as providing “the opportunity for a deeper level of involvement with the client, based on the establishment of a professional counseling relationship and the potential for assisting clients with career and personal development concerns beyond those included in career planning” (p. 4). It can be seen in each section of this paper – applicable theory, relationship strategies, the influences of diversity characteristics, biases and assumptions, career counseling models, ethical issues, the career counseling approach, appropriate assessment tools, and the impact of disasters and crises that the assistance that Naomi needs and would benefit from is more than just career planning but rather a much more in depth level of career counseling.
References


