The Career Counseling Casebook:
A Resource for Practitioners, Students, and Counselor Educators

Kathy: The Case of the Exploring Environmentalist

Kathy is a 20-year old junior at a large Midwestern university. She was the youngest of three children and was raised by her mother who had divorced her father when Kathy was 18. Her mother said that she was just waiting for the youngest one to get out of the house before she filed for divorce. She attended an urban parochial high school in the Midwest.

She has come to the university's career center to get some help in making a career decision. During her first session with the career counselor, Kathy talks about a number of occupations she has considered. She likes to write and has thought about working as a journalist or a researcher. She is also very concerned about the environment, but she is not aware of any occupations that would allow her to be involved in the environmental issues. She also likes working with children and elderly people and wants to know how she can tie these interests into her career. She has considered the possibility of going to law school because it seems like a "smart thing to do".

Her struggle to make a career decision is also reflected in the difficulty she has experienced in selecting an academic major. After "trying out" several possibilities, Kathy decided to major in history and French. She is not involved in any extracurricular or community activities.

Kathy prevents herself in a confidant way. She is very talkative and animated and seems at ease throughout the session. Her primary concern is identifying what career would be best for her and she does not make reference to anything beyond her interests. Toward the end of the first session, she asks you about how you got into counseling because it is another occupation that interests her.

Response to Kathy: The Case of the Exploring Environmentalist
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Theoretical Lens

A three-fold clarion call has sounded. There is a need for collaboration between various psychological specialties (Slaney & Russell, 1987), for convergence of career theory (Savickas, 1994), and for a contextual approach to the practice of career counseling (Vondracek & Kawasaki, 1995). From our experience as counseling psychologists in a career center (Hall) and a counseling center (Beil), we offer a response to the case of Kathy. We describe an approach to career counseling where the contextual factors of family and gender are considered primary, rather than secondary influences. Developmental-systems and feminist theories as well as women's career psychology models inform their case conceptualization.

The developmental frame will be provided by essential concepts from Okun's (1984) integrated developmental-systems approach. Fintushel and Hillard (1991) will be relied upon for the feminist/gender view, whereas Betz and Fitzgerland (1987) and Gottfredson (1996) will guide the women's career psychology perspective.

Impressions

The information from the initial counseling session forms an emerging image of a sociable young-adult woman, one who is pleasant and eager to please. Kathy's engagement of the counselor hints of a psychological openness, perhaps curiosity. In the familial sphere, there is evidence for characterizing her family as a "launching-center family" (primary task: letting go of the oldest child) or a "middle-aged-parents family" (euphemistically referred to as "empty-nest"). Kathy's observation that her mother has been anxious for Kathy to leave the home and her parents' recent divorce may be evidence of the separation-individualization tasks associated with this stage of family life. For example, as her mother ventured ahead once her youngest child left home, Kathy may have acutely experienced rejection and abandonment, threatening the secure attachment base that Blustein, Frezioso, and Schultheiss (1995) find critical to tame the anxiety that accompanies career exploration.

Given that Kathy's parents' divorce occurred as she was emerging from adolescence, her sense of self may have been negatively affected. For example, it appears as though Kathy's mother stayed in an unsatisfying relationship until Kathy graduated from high school. Influenced by exposure to marital and/or family conflict, Kathy may have become resigned to the unhappy arrangement and adopted her animated style as a response to family tension.

Kathy presents with many stated interests, but apparently with little experience "trying out" her interests in the world. Gottfredson (1996) reminds us that constructs such as masculinity-femininity and occupational prestige help form the self-concept, and that individuals are likely to consider occupations conforming to their perception of sex roles and prestige. In fact, these concerns may be weighted more heavily than may interests alone. Therefore, it may be critical for gender-role identity to be incorporated in Kathy's developing career aspirations.

Case Planning

The aforementioned impressions are viewed as markers of a readiness for beginning career counseling with positive expectations. Taken together, the impressions suggest that Kathy's quest for career specification may benefit from assistance with separation-individuation, as well as consideration of the impact of her parents divorce and her gender identity on her career identity. McDaniels and Gybers (1992) seven-phase model of career counseling will be used for the purpose of case planning. In conceptualizing career counseling as a two-phase process, Hall and Beil's case conceptualization includes only the initial three phases of McDaniels and Gysbers' model.

Initial Phase
1) Therapeutic alliance
2) Problem identification
3) Exploration of self

Action Phase
4) Acquisition of work world information
5) Action plan development
6) Choice of implementation
7) Evaluation/renegotiations

Initial Phase

The goals of the initial phase are to establish the counselor-client working relationship, to increase self-awareness, and to set realistic intervention outcomes for the action phase of counseling. These goals will be achieved by pursuing the follow two objectives: (1) the explication of Kathy's personal decision-making style, and (2) exploration of the familial and gender context of Kathy's career identity. The initial counseling session would have concluded with the counselor and Kathy agreeing that "to find a best career", it will be useful to initially look at how, in general, she makes educational/career choices, and also to identify some of the major influences on those choices.

Action Phase

As a result of the self-exploration and the consideration of familial and gender-related influences, it is anticipated that the initial phase of counseling might conclude with Kathy viewing the quest to translate her interests, academic majors, and co-curricular experiences into a career aspiration as a *process*. In a fourth and/or fifth session, it would be posed that given her gregarious temperament and learning-style preferences, Kathy

continues her career exploration by engaging in a series of experimental learning activities (i.e., co-ops, externships, internships/co-ops, volunteerism, and summer work). This would be contrasted with the more passive interventions (e.g., talk-counseling, accessing printed or audiovisual occupational information). A list of developmentally appropriate activities in which she would participate during her junior and senior years would be formulated. In addition to the counselor, Kathy will be referred to the offices of experiential education and the alumni career network to identify potential sites (in industries related to the environment) where she could research, write, or otherwise inform others about environmental issues.

Kathy would be expected to participate in the action phase with greater confidence, even with her level of career uncertainty, given an increased awareness of the contextual aspect of her career identity. She will, for example, be guided to select a mentor who can help her ongoing assessment of the effects of sex-role stereotyping. Should Kathy's uncertainty revolve around the issues associated with traditionally male-dominated fields, or roles, then it will be important for the counselor to help Kathy mobilize a strong system of support, including female role models, mentors, and supportive faculty. This may be especially useful if the familial context mirrors societal sex-role stereotypes.

As an alternative, it may be useful to consider Betz and Fitzgerald's (1987) observation that the process of women's career choice historically has suffered from the under use of abilities. In extending Kathy's interests, her abilities can be assessed as well. Perhaps through the use of an instrument such as the Self-Directed Search of the Strong Interest and Skills Confidence Inventory, assessment results could be used to aid Kathy in identifying the transferable skills she may have developed, but not considered thus far in her articulation of a career direction. Her facility with French, for example, may suggest not only an interest, but also a talent in learning language. This could lead to exploration of language-related careers with children or the elderly.

Conclusion

Practitioners from two different types of counseling centers joined forces to illustrate approaching the case of Kathy from a multi-theoretical perspective has the potential for facilitating the design of a career intervention plan where contextual dimensions are considered as primary features of the presenting issues. The case plan described supports the notion from feminist theory that for many women external factors weigh powerfully and can exert great influence on decisions. "Because of the mutually formative nature of family relationships, a divorce after twenty or so years of marriage profoundly alters the patterns of interconnection and thus shakes the roots of each member's self-perception" (Fintushel & Hillard, 1991). Thus, the proposed intervention strategy is likely to be among the most efficacious because it respects the development and systemic aspects of Kathy's individual experience (Ivey & Ivey, 1999).

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