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Reflections from the front lines: A career counselor's view of emerging adulthood

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Contemporary emerging adults (ages 18 to 29) are unlikely to have a rock-solid answer when asked: What do you want to be when you graduate? What are you going to do when you graduate? Unlike parents who tended to make early pledges to careers, the delayed commitments of today's twentysomethings worry parents. Parents often interpret their adult children's lack of career certainty as floundering. Rather, emerging adults' common response to queries about their future careers—that's what I am trying to figure out!—reflects the exploratory and transitory nature of career development in the new millennium. Emerging adulthood, between adolescence and young adulthood, is not a stage of linear development. Emerging adults move forward and backward exploring different choices and possibilities that they have for establishing careers.

However normative, all of the exploring is stressful for some; not knowing what one is going to do to support oneself can be overwhelming for others. Parents may feel helpless in trying to guide their adult children through uncharted experiences. Moreover, recentering (Tanner, 2006), the primary developmental task of the age period, is about down-shifting parent influence, and accelerating self-directedness.

The extended school-to-work transition has resulted in a need for services to help traverse these years. Career counselors are increasingly called upon to provide these resources. Likewise, mental health professionals may need to provide career development support when mental health problems interfere with career development, or because career launching is overwhelming or unsuccessful. The challenge is providing resources that fit emerging adults' distinct needs.

Currently, we lack a specialized framework for facilitating career development with this unique age group. But there is much to be gained from combining contemporary theory on emerging adult development with best practices in career counseling. An integrated model is potentially useful to a wide-array of helping professionals.

Career counseling the emerging adult

A classic career-counseling model can be modified for work with emerging adult

clients. Traditionally, the first-step in career counseling is use of the Vocational Intake Interview (VII) to establish rapport and gain information about a client's goals. The VII commonly includes an educational and work history. This also provides an opportunity to assess a client's self-understanding of strengths and deficits; gain a sense of his or her occupational knowledge; and evaluate psychological issues that may interfere with career development. This foundational information is then used to create a plan for the work the client and career counselor will undertake.

For example, a first meeting with Rebecca, age 24, revealed that ...she had a "passion for teaching." She was understandably unhappy with her decision to pursue a parent-approved path into business. In college, she majored in business because she was "good in math" and "wanted to make money." After a frustrating two years in the business world, she acknowledged what she already knew—she wasn't interested in business.

For all, career decisions often have multiple layers and meanings. An integrated developmental-career approach will encourage a career counselor to use the developmental lens to look for meaning in emerging adults' reactions to career-related experiences. In Rebecca's case, we learn that she has a passion for a career that is unrelated to the strengths and values she had in adolescence—she was good in math and she wanted to make money, respectively. Pursuing business was a valid goal; however, it is important to recognize that adolescent-era goals are often temporary and often must be "let go." In Rebecca's case, the stumbling block testing her was more psychological than practical.

Rebecca shared her frustration about her career with her parents and told them that she wanted to reroute her career into education. Her parents were not supportive. They viewed her interest in teaching as financially unrealistic and naively idealistic. They encouraged her to continue building a career in the business world.

A change in her career goals led to conflicted feelings, she wanted to pursue teaching but she longed for her parents' approval. Counselors can help emerging adults by

encouraging them to respectfully evaluate rather than wholeheartedly accept or reject parental advice and guidance. It is also important to help them avoid unwanted consequences of taking a defensive position because this can lead emerging adults to get stuck using dualistic thinking. Career choices are not like true-false questions on an exam; there can be a number of viable options.

Respecting the fact that emerging adults are in the process of separating and individuating from their parents is also an important aspect of helping this age group. Rejecting parental opinion may feel risky. And, in fact, it may be chancy in that there is real potential for parents to withdraw support (i.e., emotional or financial) when their authority is challenged. In Rebecca's case, working with her on her career development issues involved grappling with what it meant for her to take responsibility for her own life choices and direction.

Helping professionals can support this process by encouraging "ownership" over the career planning process. When the emerging adult client asks, as they so often, do "What's out there?" the key is to teach them how to figure it out for themselves. Many emerging adults have research abilities that were developed in the course of their education but they may not know how to apply those research skills in the career decision-making arena. Working with the emerging adult to develop a research plan that draws on both secondary published sources and primary research (usually in the form of informational interviewing) will help them access valuable information. For example, Rebecca, after researching and discovering that teaching salaries were comparable to many business professions, grew more invested in making a career change. Teaching had lots of enticements: a nine-month work schedule (with summers off) as well as the option to supplement her income with coaching or extracurricular activities. She knew she'd love the work and it fit with her long-term goal to balance career and family.

Acquiring information about career options and jobs gives emerging adults immediate access to data and information. This step is essential for designing a career development plan, but also useful to them when they are challenged to objectively evaluate advice. In Rebecca's case, as she made progress in her research, she began to be less focused on her parents' reactivity to her leaving a pathway in which they had invested. Moving forward, she integrated her career goals with goals in other life domains that are important

to her—family. This case study reveals the dynamic underlying process involved in career counseling emerging adults. Career development is but one of a number of demands and challenges facing an emerging adult.

Rebecca's case is an example of an emerging adult client who was relatively far along in the career "identity" process. Other emerging adult clients may be less certain of their interests, aware of their skills, or attuned to opportunities. Working with these clients, career counselors can turn to a number of classic resources useful with older clients who are more likely to be exploring career alternatives.

A career that promises good "fit" is one that is consonant with one's interests, abilities, and personality. Emerging adults are actively searching for an answer to the formidable question, who am I? what do I like? Some emerging adults may be actively working on these issues, others may be stalled-out in the process. The Strong Interest Inventory (SII) can provide professionals with an understanding of emerging adults' career interests in two ways. First, the SII can identify psychological obstacles and can identify potential points of intervention. For example, emerging adults characterized by flat profiles, do not have any compelling occupational interests. This signals the counselor to understand the disengagement. Other emerging adults are identified by circumscribed profiles; this indicates that an emerging adult's interest may not translate into a career choice, but rather a hobby. Working with these emerging adults, counselors can help them determine how strong interests in music, art, drama, and writing may relate to viable career options.

Even when there is extreme interest in a career, abilities that translate into doing well in that career will play a large role in determining success. Emerging adults may or may not be accurate in their self-understanding of their abilities. After years of being told what they are good at (i.e., by parents, teachers, coaches, peers), emerging adults may need help identifying strengths that may not have been praised or highly regarded before emerging adulthood. Rebecca constructed her career objectives both on knowledge about the field and knowledge about herself:

While Rebecca was "good in math" she also had very good communication and relationship skills. Her math skills were useful in her business career but she did not want them to be the central focus of her daily activities. A driving force behind her

passion for teaching was her passion for communicating.

Aptitude testing provides objective information about strengths and also weaknesses. Utilizing the developmental approach to deliver results to emerging adult clients is crucial. It is essential to stress the plasticity of the age period, to acknowledge that emerging adulthood is a window of opportunity for gaining new skills. Therefore, aptitude tests provide useful, but not definitive evaluation. It is also helpful to include a discussion of "motivated skills" because it places the emphasis on skills that an individual finds enjoyable and is motivated to develop.

Last, emerging adulthood is an ideal time for choosing a career that one will like. Because people tend to like things that are consistent with their natural dispositions, personality assessments can provide feedback about the type of jobs that are likely to feel right. The Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI), a personality test grounded in Jungian typology, categorizes personality along four core dimensions: extraversion-Introversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, judging-perceiving. In sessions with the emerging adult, this information can be translated into meaningful discussions about how personality type influences vocational choices. In turn, this can help emerging adults select fulfilling careers.

Conclusion

Emerging adults face a unique set of developmental and practical challenges as they struggle with what it means to become adult. Career decision-making is central to a successful outcome because of its potential to promote psychological self-sufficiency and well-being. Emerging adults are asking big questions: "What do I want to be when I grow up?" "What am I good at?". Clearly there is no one right answer to such monumental life questions. There is, however, an incremental process of exploration and choice-making that can be used by professionals in a variety of disciplines that will enable emerging adults to make satisfying life decisions. By fostering collaborative relationships with emerging adults, professionals can model a different kind of authority relationship in which emerging adults play an increasingly independent role. Rather than assume a mantle of authority, professionals need to view emerging adults as the experts in their own lives. Our goal is to help them develop that expertise.

Recommended resources:

- Guerriero, J. & Allen, R. (1998). *Key questions in career counseling: Techniques to deliver effective career counseling services*. Florence, KY: Routledge.
- Kidd, J. (2006). *Understanding career counseling theory, research, and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Maltz, S., & Grahn, B. (2003). *A fork in the road: A career planning guide for young adults*. Manassas Park, VA: Impact Publications.
- Nardi, D. (2005). *8 keys to self-leadership: From awareness to action*. Huntington Beach, CA: United Business Press.
- Swanson, J., & Fouad, N. (2009) *Career theory and practice; learning through case studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

