

Assessment of Readiness for Vocational Guidance: From Theory to Practice

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Introduction and Purpose

A student enters the Center for Career Services and asks, "Are there jobs for Criminal Justice majors?" While the easy response would be to show the student information on the employment outlook for police officers, probation and parole officers, private investigators, and criminalists, the root of the presenting problem is much deeper. Upon probing, the counselor learns that the student is an undeclared major who is also considering business as a major field of study so that eventually he can take over his father's flooring business. This suggests that the student is really confused about a future direction and that perhaps intervention needs to begin at a different point, that is, with the assessment of interests, abilities, values, and personality. What might have occurred if the initial question about job prospects had been answered, with no attention devoted to the lack of self-knowledge and progress in career development that the student demonstrated?

The central question at this stage is whether the client is ready for vocational guidance. Only when clients have established their vocational identity are they able to translate it into occupational possibilities.

Clients request career services for many reasons: to identify a direction, to change jobs, to find a first job, or to advance their career. At the core of best practice in counseling lies the question of how best to address client needs. A myriad of counseling theories exist to explain discrete segments of the presenting problem. Savickas (1995) has offered a framework that links career theories, client problems, and counseling interventions. He viewed the framework "as a toolbox which organizes the most common career problems and relevant career counseling interventions" that counselors can use to a) assess client career concerns, b) identify the career theory that best comprehends those concerns, c) select inventories and tests to measure and clarify concerns, and d) apply intervention strategies devised to resolve these concerns (Savickas, 1995).

The results of the Strong Interest Inventory and the Myers Briggs Temperament Inventory can also help to identify major client issues and suggest ways that counselors can proceed to respond to the uniqueness of the client. Similar to Savickas, Hammer and Kummerow (1992) proposed that when personality preferences are unclear, e.g. undifferentiated vocational identity, clients are unable to describe themselves and to translate self concept into congruent occupations.

This paper will briefly review the framework and theory proposed by Savickas for linking career theory and practice, and a model for identifying client issues and related counseling interventions described by Hammer and Kummerow.

It will also describe the results of a pilot study conducted during summer and fall 1998 to investigate the readiness for vocational guidance of college students at a mid-sized public comprehensive university in northwestern Pennsylvania using "My Vocational Situation" (Holland, Daiger and Power, 1980), an instrument designed to assess a client's needs for vocational counseling and for implementing appropriate interventions.

Brief Review of Framework and Theory

How do counselors proceed with clients seeking career counseling? Many routinely use the same assessment instruments and advice with most clients. Recent theorists have proposed frameworks for assessing client concerns and determining appropriate interventions. Two frameworks that focus on the presence of clear vocational identity as a precursor to recommending interventions are presented here.

Savickas' Framework for Career Intervention

In working as problem-solving consultants, counselors regularly encounter the professional problem of deciding which theory and intervention to use with which clients (Savickas, 1995). Theories and models tend to address circumscribed problems, thereby providing only partial answers. Practice must be holistic and address the complexity of clients' problems. Savickas devised a framework that links career theories, client problems, and counseling interventions which he views "as a toolbox which organizes the most common career problems and relevant career interventions in discrete compartments bounded by separate career theories."

The framework for career services developed by Savickas can be delineated by the types of problems and interventions it houses, and by the particular career interventions it links with six types of career questions clients ask. The six types of career services/interventions are identified as: occupational placement, vocational guidance, career counseling, career education, career therapy, and position coaching. While the explanation of each segment of the framework and recommended intervention is fascinating, it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe fully. (See Figure 1).

The framework can be used to systematically assess the client's career problem and consider what the client might do about it. This process is often intuitive or experience-based for career counselors and perhaps not always based on empirical or theoretical data. Savickas asserts that before administering career inventories and tests, counselors should assess the problem about which they want to collect data, then administer specific inventories and tests that assess that problem.

Savickas has advocated that assessment of a client's problem begins with a short series of branching decisions. The main branch or first step is to determine whether the client is ready for vocational guidance or not. This decision focuses on vocational identity. If clients can state their interests, abilities, values and goals, they are ready to translate their vocational identity into occupational possibilities. If they have a diffused or confused sense of vocational identity, the counselor needs to understand why they cannot coherently articulate their life themes. "My Vocational Situation" is an instrument designed to identify problems of vocational identity.

Savickas (1995) stated that if there is an identity problem, identity formation may be thwarted by problems in a) self-concept, b) delayed development of career attitudes and

competencies, or c) motivation. The counselor can then use career education to change beliefs, career counseling to clarify self concept, or career therapy to manage motivation.

If the primary branching decision is that the client has a clear vocational identity, the issue is one of person-environment fit. Problems may be of educational/vocational choice, transition, or establishment. The counselor can use guidance to predict fit, placement to secure fit, or coaching to improve fit.

Savickas' (1995) framework provides a unified scheme that counselors can use to a) assess client career concerns, b) identify the career theory that best comprehends those concerns, c) select inventories and tests designed to measure those concerns, and d) apply intervention strategies devised to resolve those concerns. The framework was designed to systematize the interaction between theory and practice in the daily work of practitioners.

Savickas stated further that the framework can map career problems and then develop protocols for effective intervention with particular populations. Counselors could systematically collect case studies linked to major career theories and then use the cases to develop counseling modes that specify "treatment protocols for frequently encountered career problems in specific populations (Lucas, in press)." Case studies allow career researchers to isolate change mechanisms specific to a precise technique in a particular dyad (Kirschner, Hoffman, and Hill, 1994).

Hammer and Kummerow's Counseling Strategies for Combined Use of Strong and MBTI

Hammer and Kummerow (1992) described use of the Strong Interest Inventory and Myers Briggs Temperament Inventory (MBTI) to suggest an initial approach to counseling. (See Figure 2). The results of these two instruments can help to identify major client issues and suggest some ways a counselor can proceed with career counseling in order to respond to the uniqueness of clients. The schema provides a heuristic device to trigger thinking about what might be the best approach to working with a client.

Similar to Savickas' approach, the first step is to classify whether the client's profile reflects a clear pattern of interests and a clear set of personality preferences. Unclear MBTI preferences raise questions about the client's level of self-awareness or sense of self-identity, thus suggesting an unclear vocational identity.

A profile on the Strong that would be classified in the unclear category is one from which no clear interest pattern emerges. That is, the scores do not differ from one another. This definition includes two kinds of diametrically opposed profiles -- "flat" or "depressed," and "elevated" profiles. A clear Strong profile would be one with at least some high scores and a configuration of likes and dislikes that form an interpretable pattern that makes sense to the client.

Hammer and Kummerow (1992) discuss the four possible categories that result when these clear and unclear profiles are combined: 1) personality preferences and interest patterns are both unclear; 2) personality preferences are clear and interest patterns are unclear; 3) personality

preferences are unclear and interest patterns are clear; and 4) personality preferences and interest patterns are both clear. The counselor is now ready to make use of the information about the client's predominate issues and to consider strategies for dealing with them. The eventual goal is to move to direct counseling action which is the target of interventions.

A brief interpretation of each category and possible intervention follows. Unclear personality preferences and interest patterns suggest an inability to describe one's self and no immediately identifiable interest patterns. Younger clients with general identity issues, including undifferentiated vocational identity, typically fall into this category. A college freshman with little work experience might be an example of a typical client in this category. Interventions include counseling on self-esteem and identity issues, and possibly as the client learns more about jobs, assistance to integrate new experiences.

Test profiles which evidence clear personality preferences but unclear interest patterns might describe a person with clear identity who has little information about the world of work. Perhaps a homemaker returning to the workplace understands herself well but knows little of the world of work. An appropriate intervention might focus on career exploration: reading, informational interviews, and part-time work. A related scenario is a client with a wide variety of interests who needs counseling to develop a strategy for decision-making based on personality preferences.

When personality preferences are unclear and interest patterns are clear, a number of hypotheses are suggested, such as situational pressures or burnout. An example might be a person who sustains a disability and must suddenly change careers. Interventions include supportive counseling to help resolve a developmental or situational issue, decision-making strategies, or a combination of career counseling with supportive counseling.

Clear personality preferences and interest patterns suggest that it is time for the client to take action toward career goals. Confirmation of these clear patterns in counseling further enhances self-knowledge and self-confidence.

Summary

Both Savickas' and Hammer and Kummerow's work have suggested frameworks for evaluating client career concerns and identifying potential interventions that will facilitate clients' progress toward realistic career goals. In both frameworks, the purpose of the initial assessment is to determine whether the client possesses a clear vocational identity as a precursor to appropriate career counseling interventions.

Pilot Study

Purpose

This study utilized a non-equivalent control group design and attempted to determine the effect of counseling intervention on vocational identity, identification of need for occupational information, and the presence of barriers as measured by My Vocational Situation (MVS). It also

sought to determine the relationships between Vocational Identity, Occupational Information, and demographic variables as described in the MVS norming sample study.

Method

Instrument

"My Vocational Situation" has been described by the authors (Holland, Daiger and Power, 1980) as an "experimental diagnostic form for the selection of vocational assistance." It was designed as an approach by which the assignment of a client to a category would increase the likelihood of selecting and following an effective treatment. This approach is based on the assumption that most difficulties in vocational decision-making fall into one or more of the following categories: a) problems of vocational identity, b) lack of information about jobs or training, or c) environmental or personal barriers. The approach is intended to increase the rate of compatible and effective client-treatment interactions and the efficiency of treatments.

The instrument has three scales. The Vocational Identity (VI) scale refers to the possession of a clear and stable picture of one's goals, interests, personality, and talents. This characteristic leads to untroubled decision-making and confidence in one's ability to make good decisions in the face of environmental ambiguities. The Occupational Information (OI) scale provides a way for the client to indicate a need for vocational information. The Barriers (B) scale asks respondents to identify external obstacles to a chosen occupational goal. "Yes" responses or listing of an idiosyncratic obstacle may enable the counselor to focus promptly on a significant problem area.

The VI scale has a high degree of internal consistency for samples of high school students, college students, and workers. The OI and B scales have a relatively low degree of internal consistency, especially among high school students. The diverse content and low reliability of the OI and B scales indicate that they resemble check lists more than scales.

Based on the norming sample, the authors have identified positive correlations between age, VI, and OI. The VI and OI scales correlated negatively with the number and variety of vocational aspirations a person lists on the MVS. Variety was assessed by counting the number of different types of occupations named, using Holland's six occupational themes. These results suggest that individuals with a clear sense of identity and a small number of informational needs have a small number and variety of occupational aspirations.

Procedure

The MVS was administered to college students who voluntarily requested services from the Center for Career Services at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania during summer and fall 1998 at their initial appointment (N=56). It was re-administered at the end of the semester following counseling intervention(s) (N=17) to determine the effects of interventions as measured by the MVS scales. A second mailing and follow-up phone call to each student who did not return the post-test were completed in an effort to improve response rate. The control

group consisted of college students enrolled in two sections of a freshmen English course (N=30) who visited the Center for Career Services with their professor for a presentation to the class on office services in September 1998. The instrument was re-administered to the control group at the end of fall semester 1998 (N=30).

In the experimental group, it is assumed that students either participated in prescribed interventions with counselor guidance or independently. The control group completed assignments as part of their course, such as writing a paper comparing and contrasting two occupations to determine their best choice. They were also encouraged to use the resources of the Center for Career Services on their own.

Participants

The total sample population consisted of 75% traditional-age college students, and 25% nontraditional students. Over half (59%) of students were entering college freshmen with 0 earned credits. Females comprised 61% of the sample population. Among students who took both the pre- and post-tests, only 10% were nontraditional. Seventy-five percent were entering freshmen.

Results

As in the MVS norming sample, a significant positive correlation was found between Occupational Information and Vocational Identity on both the pretest ($r=.34, p<.01$), and the posttest ($r=.41, p<.01$). Age was positively correlated with VI scores on the pre-test ($r=.29$). A significant negative correlation was found between pretest barriers and age ($r=.35$). On the post-test, Vocational Identity and Occupational Information were again positively correlated ($r=.41$). Females demonstrated higher scores on both pre- and post-tests. Occupation Information Barriers were positively correlated from pre-test to post-test ($r=.57$), and negatively correlated with variety of occupations on the post test ($r=.53$).

In order to test for initial differences between the experimental and control groups, Mann-Whitney U tests (non-parametric) and t-tests (parametric) were utilized. With the exception of OI, no pre-test differences were observed between groups. The groups did differ in regard to gender, age, and credits. Hence, to test for post-test differences between groups, analysis of covariance was used. On all MVS scales except OI, differences between groups at post-testing was assessed using gender, age, and credits as covariates. No significant differences between groups emerged. On the OI scale, participants' pretest score on OI was used in addition to gender, age, and credits as a covariate. Statistically significant differences ($F=8.04, p<.001$; adjusted R square = .47) between groups (experimental>control) was found on OI at post-testing.

Discussion

While results of this pilot study failed to demonstrate a significant difference between groups on the variable of vocational identity (VI), a significant difference did exist on occupational information (OI) after controlling for gender, age, credits, and pre-test scores on the OI scale, with the experimental group outscoring the control group. This finding may suggest

that recommended interventions positively impacted students' understanding of occupational information among those students who sought career services (experimental group). However, several threats to internal validity exist in this study which prevent cause-effect inferences to be made. Initial differences between the experimental and control groups in unassessed areas that may be related to OI may have accounted for differences on OI at post testing. Additionally, the lack of significant differences found on other scales may be a function of both groups engaging in a career intervention. Moreover, participation in a career intervention was assumed to have occurred among students in the experimental group. However, no monitoring of intervention implementation occurred. The small sample size, and the large number of students in the experimental group who did not complete post testing and were therefore dropped from the study, pose additional problems relative to interpretability of results. Finally, the provincial nature of the sample (all from one university, control group all from one class) severely limit the external validity and generalizability of the results. In addition to eliminating the problems just described, future research should attempt to specifically match client interventions directly to client MVS pre-test scores to insure that clients are receiving the individual services they need.

References

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- Holland, J.L., Daiger, D.C., & Power, P.G. (1980), My Vocational Situation. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Savickas, M.L. (1995). A framework for linking career theory and practice. Paper presented at the Fifth National Conference of the National Career Development Association, San Francisco, CA.

Savickas' "Toolbox"

1. Assess client career concerns
2. Identify career theory that best comprehends those concerns
3. Select inventories and tests to measure and clarify concerns
4. Apply intervention strategies to resolve these concerns

Figure 1

Savickas' Framework for Career Services Branching Decisions

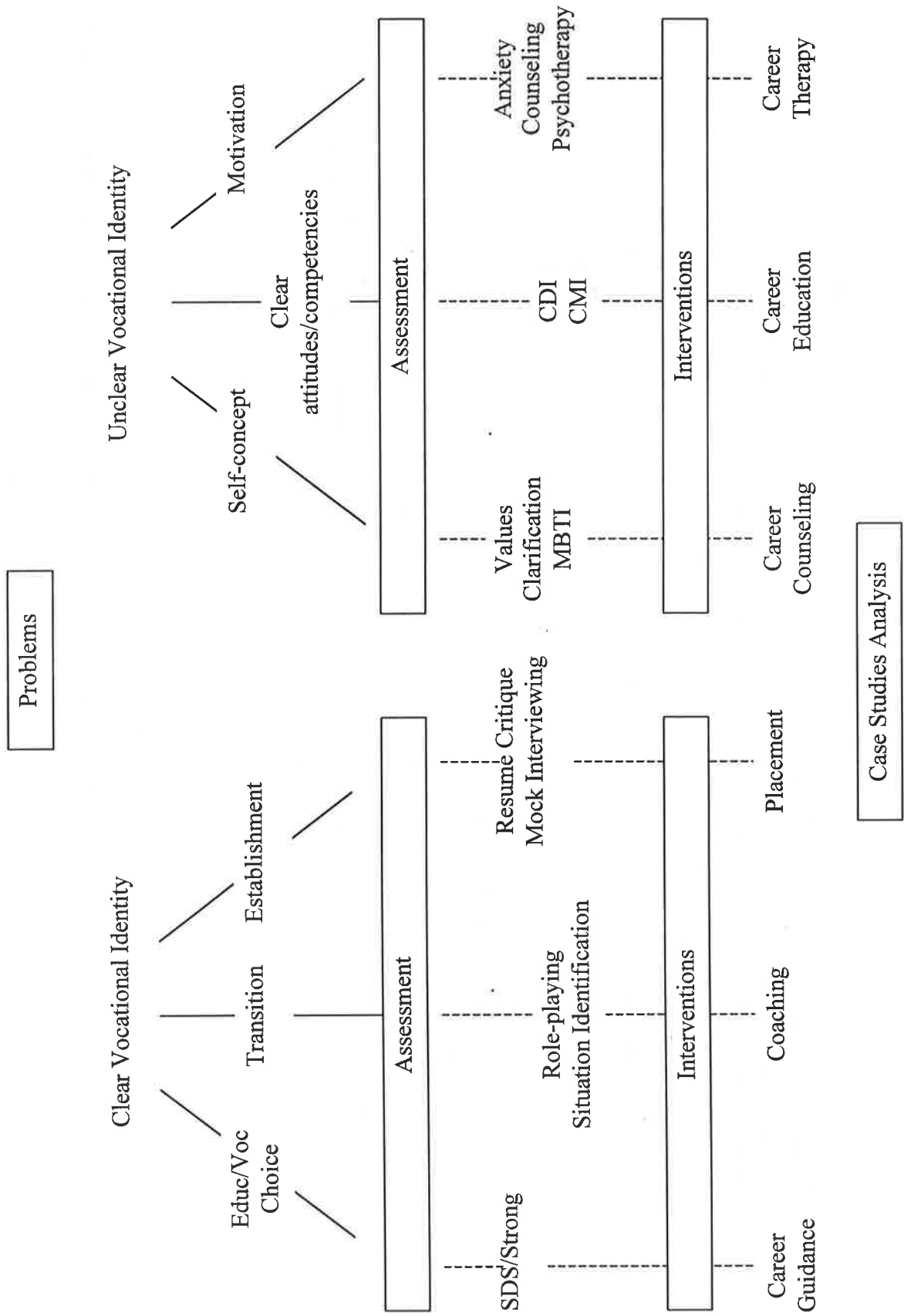





Figure 2.

Table 7. Suggested Counseling Strategies and Possible Client Issues Based on *Strong* and MBTI Profiles

		MBTI	
	Unclear Preferences	<p>Counsel Identity, independence, or self-esteem issues Suggests personal counseling focused on these issues</p> 	<p>Explore Lack of information about or experience with the world of work or "too many" possibilities Provide information: try practical part-time jobs, informational interviews, or explore the overall theme or "big picture"</p> 
<i>Strong</i>	Unclear interest pattern	<p>Support Developmental or situational issue Combine counseling for developmental or situational issue with career counseling Support and problem solving</p> 	<p>Action Ready to set goals or take action Develop action plan based on assessment results plus establishment of client goals and values and the opportunities in the job market</p>
	Clear interest pattern		