PRACTITIONER BEWARE! A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS THAT INFORM PRACTICE

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Underpinning the practice of career counsellors is a range of various theories and perspectives. The concept of self-esteem is a term frequently used by those in the helping professions and often with little regard for its limitations. This article argues that careers counsellors need to keep up-to-date with evolving theories that inform their practice. The theory of self-esteem has been much researched—instruments have been developed to 'measure' self-esteem, which have little validity and grave weaknesses in assumed links between self-esteem and social behaviour. Theories of self-efficacy and learned helplessness are offered as alternative theories on which career counsellors may base their approach. Again the caution is sounded, career counsellors need to be prepared to constantly review the theories that we base our practice on, in the light of new research and understanding.

In their article on the effect of self-esteem on the job search behaviour of Singapore tertiary students, Hoi, Keng-Howe and Fie (*Australian Journal of Career Development*, Winter 2003) failed to define the term self-esteem. They appear to have assumed a common understanding among their readers of the parameters of the term, something many writers are guilty of doing. As someone who in past years has researched the experiences of unemployed women and used the term and a measure of self-esteem, I too have been guilty of failing to plumb the underbelly of the term, and have used it loosely and with an assumed common understanding (Walker, 1993).

Over my years of counselling and teaching I have heard the term used—and used it myself—when discussing issues as broad as behaviour change and as specific as learning to spell. The concept of self-esteem is commonly associated with the writing of a pioneer

researcher in the field, Stanley Coopersmith (1967). Self-esteem is often defined in terms of how we evaluate our characteristics and ourselves, and while there are now over 200 instruments for measuring self-esteem, few of these instruments have been validated (Kohn, 1994).

The data to support the theorised links between self-esteem and social behaviour, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, academic achievement, and so on are at best weak and, in many cases, negative. Kohn (1994) described the many research projects designed to find such links and their stunning inability to do so.

For those working with people involved in career decision making or seeking to improve their employment status, self-esteem would appear to be less important as a motivator than we might intuitively believe. As a lens through which the motivations for the behaviour of people seeking employment can be viewed, the concept of self-esteem is considered gravely flawed.

SELF-EFFICACY

The concept of self-efficacy offered by Bandura (1982) and the theory of learned helplessness offered by Seligman (1975) provide two lenses through which practitioners might view their practice for working with people seeking employment or assistance with career development.

As described in an early article written for career counsellors working with unemployed job seekers (Walker, 1992), research by Bandura and others has shown that it is partly on the self-beliefs of efficacy that people choose what challenges to undertake, how much effort to use and how long to persevere for.

Self-beliefs are perceptions an individual has about himself or herself, their abilities, their limitations and their potential. Self-beliefs also affect the extent that people are vulnerable to stress and despondency when they confront difficulty and failure. Self-judgment of their capabilities will also influence their thought patterns and emotional reactions as they anticipate, for example, a job interview; as well as when they attend the actual job interview.

Those who judge themselves inefficacious in coping with demands think of their personal deficiencies as more formidable than they really are. In turn, this creates stress that impairs their

performance by diverting energy from how best to succeed, to concerns surrounding failure.

According to Bandura (1982), a major cognitive mechanism of motivation and self-directedness is the capacity to exercise self-influence by personal challenge, and the ability to evaluate one's own attainment. The fulfilment of a goal leads towards self-satisfaction, and dissatisfaction occurs from failure to achieve a desired goal. There are two possible responses to dissatisfaction from failure to achieve a desired goal: a person may react by enhancing their effort to achieve their goal—that is, negative discrepancies can be motivating; in other instances, a large discrepancy can discourage further effort. A person's judgment of their own self-efficacy is important in determining which of these reactions is likely to occur (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: JUDGMENT OF SELF-EFFICACY

Outcome expectancy is defined as 'a person's estimate that a given behaviour will lead to certain outcomes. An *efficacy expectation* is the conviction that one can successfully execute the behaviour required to produce the outcomes' (Bandura, 1977, p. 193). This distinction is important. For example, it is possible that an unemployed person may believe that good letter writing in their job seeking will enhance the probability of gaining employment (outcome expectancy). They may also believe that they don't have the literacy or self-editing skills needed to implement the strategy (efficacy expectation).

We can relate Bandura's discussion of outcome and efficacy beliefs to different reactions to the experience of unemployment. If a person has a low sense of self-efficacy and the environment is considered unresponsive, then resignation and apathy may result. When a person has a low sense of self-efficacy, but sees the environment as being responsive—that is, the employment scene is considered healthy, but there has

been no employment found—self-devaluation and despondency may occur.

An individual with a high sense of self-efficacy who believes the environment will reward performance attainments is likely to respond with positive assured actions. A person with high self-efficacy, but who believes the environment is unresponsive and unlikely to reward effort with a positive outcome, may result in attempts to alter the environment. They may relocate to another location in an attempt to increase the likelihood of successfully gaining employment.

This analysis implies that psychological reactions to unemployment can vary depending on a combination of outcome and efficacy beliefs. As an example, Bandura suggested that an individual who believes they are not educated, experienced or skilled enough to find new employment (low in self efficacy), and who also sees the employment market as extremely limited (low outcome expectancy), is unlikely to make a long sustained effort at job seeking after experiencing a few rejections from employers. A person's thought patterns and emotional responses are influenced by a person's self-judgment. For example, if a person was offered employment that they perceive themselves to be unskilled for, they are likely to become tense because of the discrepancy between their self-perception of personal skillfulness and the required skills, which puts at risk their work performance. This may lead to impaired performance that jeopardises their ability to keep the position, and if it is lost, they experience reinforcement in their negative self-belief.

Bandura's work on self-efficacy provides a valuable insight into the behaviour and coping strategies of people seeking employment. While not a definitive analysis, it offers a theoretical basis to build strategies for intervention with individuals.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Seligman's (1975) theory of learned helplessness provides a way that practitioners working with people seeking employment can view the behavioural choices of their clients. Seligman related learned helplessness to an expectation held by an individual that outcomes were independent of their own actions. The theory expanded to include attributional variables. The variables or dimensions were identified as locus,

stability and globality. The locus dimension, described as the point of control, distinguishes personal helplessness from global helplessness. For example, a person may try hard to find work, but attributes their lack of success to a personal deficiency (personal helplessness). Another may believe the economic situation is so bad that there is no chance of employment and ascribe the blame to an external factor (global helplessness).

This theory assumes that the chronicity and generality of helplessness are influenced by the degree to which causes of unemployment are seen as stable and global. When an expectation is based on stable and global causes, helplessness extends over time and may generalise across a range of situations. For example, if an individual believes that the economy is the major influence on the availability of work (global situation) and that the situation will remain closed for a long period of time (stability attribution), the individual may develop a sense of helplessness—nothing they can do will alter the situation because of factors beyond their control. This may be expressed by despair and depression, and may affect other dimensions of the person's life (more generalised) — for example, family and marital relationships.

In relation to the psychological impact of unemployment, the learned helplessness theory provides a way that career counsellors may view the behaviour of their clients. Central to the theory is that an individual has the expectation that outcomes are uncontrollable or occur independently of any response they may make. The tendency to blame others (whether governments, employers, god or whoever) is a common behaviour pattern witnessed among those who feel they have little control over their personal employment situation. This may result in a range of behaviours including creative avoidance of situations where success is possible.

CONCLUSIONS

The two theories outlined above provide two perspectives that may be valuable for practitioners. The cautionary note is that, as with the theory of self-esteem, theories that inform our practice need critical analysis and constant review. Something that intuitively feels like it is right needs to withstand the rigours of research and critique. If it fails to withstand such scrutiny, then we should revisit the choices we

make concerning our professional practice and reform them in light of the understanding presently available.

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