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ABSTRACT

Career counseling for gifted students has proven problematic because traditional methods of career assessment are not appropriate for use with this population. During the last decade, research regarding career counseling for gifted individuals has focused on three areas: multipotentiality, values-based career counseling and assessment, and special populations, such as females and minorities. Literature from each of these areas is reviewed and a critique of the current research available regarding each topic is offered. Suggestions for future research are provided. Multipotentiality research has shown that the ability to succeed in a variety of career paths can make a gifted student's career selection problematic, and that they often choose career paths on the basis of salary and employment opportunity rather than expertise. Validity of the concept of multipotentiality is also at issue. Traditional career interest profiles often result in a "high-flat" profile, which is not helpful to the student. Recent values-based counseling research has many flaws in design. Gifted females and minorities face special barriers that have yet to be fully addressed by empirical studies. Although researchers have identified barriers such as role stereotyping, they have yet to develop solutions. Meanwhile, gifted students have too many options and too little guidance; role models are needed. (Author/EMK)

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Running Head: CAREER COUNSELING FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

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Career Counseling for Gifted Students: Literature Review & Critique

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Abstract

Career counseling for gifted students has proven problematic because traditional methods of career assessment are not appropriate for use with this population. A review of the research indicates that multipotentiality, alternative techniques and assessments, such as values-based interventions, and special populations, such as females and minorities, are the current issues facing counselors in this field. Large deficiencies exist in the number of effective and proven interventions for this population. Critiques of the current research available are offered, and suggestions for future research are provided.

### Career Counseling for Gifted Students: Literature Review & Critique

In 1925, Terman proposed to define gifted individuals as those who obtained an IQ score of 140 or higher on the Stanford-Binet. This definition, however, clearly limited the concept of giftedness to intellectual ability. As such, others have expanded upon this definition over the years to include characteristics such as creativity (Guilford, 1956), leadership ability (Marland, 1972), and exceptional performance on verbal, spatial-visual, musical, or mathematical tasks (Kerr, 1991). Currently, the expanded definition of giftedness includes “general intellectual ability,” traditionally measured by IQ scores, “specific intellectual ability,” or the ability to excel in a particular areas such as music or science, “general original/creative thinking,” an area which includes complex problem solving, and “specific creative talent,” which is the ability to produce ideas applicable to a specific area, such as art or business, that are original and socially valuable (Milgram, 1991b, p. 11-12).

It is widely held that career development is a lifelong process (Delisle & Squires, 1989; Silverman, 1989; Milgram, 1991a). In general, career counseling helps an individual to explore a variety of career opportunities, to narrow his or her options based upon interests and abilities, to make career decisions, and to develop a plan to attain his or her goals (Milgram, 1991a). Career counseling in an educational setting, then, is an important component of this developmental process because it provides students with both guidance and structure as they explore career options and make occupational and educational decisions.

During the last decade, research regarding career counseling for gifted individuals has focused on three areas: multipotentiality, values-based career counseling and assessment, and special populations, such as females and minorities. The current article will review the main

points offered by this body of research; each point will be directly followed by a critique of the information currently available regarding each topic. Suggestions for future studies in this field will also be offered.

### Multipotentiality: Literature Review

When an average student selects his or her career path, the realm of occupational possibilities is often limited by the student's skills and abilities. In contrast, a gifted student is often not limited by his or her skills and abilities when making career decisions. This is referred to as multipotentiality, which is "the ability to select and develop any number of career options" (Kerr & Fisher, 1997, p. 239). Researchers have conceptualized gifted students as multipotential because their exceptional nature allows them to perform competently at almost any intellectual endeavor (Achter, Lubinski, & Benbow, 1996; Kerr & Fisher, 1997). As such, gifted students find themselves faced with the good fortune of having a multitude of viable career options.

However, researchers have found that the ability to succeed in a variety of career paths can make a gifted student's career selection problematic (Delisle & Squires, 1989; Kerr, 1991). The negative consequences of multipotentiality among gifted adolescents include a fear of selecting a "wrong" choice (Achter, et al., 1996), a sense of societal obligation due to one's exceptional abilities (Delisle & Squires, 1989; Kerr & Erb, 1991), and an extended delay in career selection (Kerr, 1991). In addition, gifted students tend not to select career paths in their area of expertise such as English or social studies (Kerr & Fisher, 1997). Instead, research has found that the majority of gifted students select traditional career paths such as law, medicine, business, engineering, and communications (Kerr & Colangelo, 1988). By

rejecting their area of expertise in favor of traditional career paths, gifted students are clearly making career decisions based upon potential salary and employment opportunities rather than upon their own interests, skills, and abilities (Kerr & Fisher, 1997).

### Multipotentiality: Critique

Interestingly, despite the prevalence of the concept of multipotentiality in the literature, very little research has been conducted to validate its existence among gifted students. Rather, the concept has been hypothesized and its influence upon gifted students has been proposed. This lack of quantitative support for multipotentiality was expressed by Achter, et al. (1996), who wrote that “support for the notion of multipotentiality itself seems to rest primarily on unsystematic anecdotal evidence” (p. 66). Thus, the very existence of multipotentiality among gifted students has been challenged in the research (Milgram, 1991a; Achter, et al., 1996). As such, further research needs to be conducted to verify the existence and influence that multipotentiality has upon the career development of gifted students.

However, despite the lack of evidence supporting the existence of multipotentiality among gifted students, the concept itself has face validity. That is, multipotentiality does help to explain the patterns seen among gifted students, such as excellence in a variety of areas or an extended delay in career selection (Kerr, 1991). Furthermore, the *perception* of a student’s multipotentiality by a teacher or counselor, despite a lack of evidence of its actual existence, can have negative consequences for the student. For instance, teachers and counselors may view a gifted student’s multipotentiality as a blessing rather than a burden. As such, the already limited resources of teacher and counselors may be devoted towards students who exhibit underachievement or adjustment difficulties (Milgram, 1991a). In addition, teachers

and counselors may overestimate a gifted student's ability to select a career wisely based upon the teacher or counselor's *perception* of the gifted student's multipotentiality. Thus, further research is also needed to examine the influence that teacher and counselor *perceptions* of multipotentiality have upon gifted students.

### Values-Based Career Counseling and Assessment: Literature Review

Traditionally, career counseling has attempted to identify a student's abilities and interests, and then match these to particular occupations (Kerr & Erb, 1991; Achter, et al., 1996). The assessment tools often used for traditional career counseling include the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory (Achter, et al., 1996) and the Self-Directed Search (Kerr & Fisher, 1997). Among gifted individuals, however, traditional career assessments such as these have often resulted in a "high-flat" occupational interest profile, which is a profile that demonstrates the gifted student's excellence in a variety of disciplines, and fails to narrow a student's career options (Silverman, 1989; Kerr & Erb, 1991; Kerr & Fisher, 1997). As such, a gifted student who receives traditional career counseling learns very little about himself or herself, and thus does not benefit greatly from the intervention.

Due to the inutility of traditional career counseling and assessment, then, researchers have sought to develop more appropriate methods for use with gifted individuals. It has been theorized that, instead of focusing on abilities and interests, career counseling for gifted students should focus on an individual's values, needs, and identity development; this approach is called values-based career counseling (Silverman, 1989; Kerr & Erb, 1991; Achter et al., 1996). As such, gifted individuals would be encouraged to develop career goals that interest them and have personal meaning (Kerr & Fisher, 1997). Kerr and Erb (1991) tested these

hypotheses by providing values-based career counseling, comprised of group counseling and assessments that identified values, personality traits, and needs, to gifted college students.

They found that gifted students who had received the values-based intervention felt a stronger sense of confidence and identity, and a stronger certainty with regard to career goals, than the control group (Kerr & Erb, 1991).

#### Values-Based Career Counseling and Assessment: Critique

Clearly, then, researchers have recognized the need for more effective and innovative methods of career counseling for gifted students. Researchers have failed, however, to adequately and empirically develop or examine non-traditional methods. Furthermore, flaws in the research that does exist make the current findings questionable. For instance, in their values-based intervention research, Kerr and Erb (1991) did not match the control group to the group being studied, nor did they differentiate the individual efficacy of the variety of methods used. In addition, the sample size of 41 subjects is small, limiting the utility of the researchers' results. Thus, these findings must be interpreted and generalized with caution. Furthermore, although many researchers have theorized about the efficacy of values-based counseling, their arguments have anecdotal and hypothetical support but lack any empirical evidence (Silverman, 1991; Achter et al., 1996).

As such, the current body of literature fails to adequately examine the values-based approach to career counseling with gifted students. Future research should develop individual values-based interventions and assessment tools for use with the gifted population. Research should also investigate the efficacy of these approaches with gifted students. Furthermore, researchers in this area should be more vigilant in their research design and methodology such

that their results are generalizable and valid. Finally, alternative interventions should be investigated; as is often the case in counseling, all individuals will not respond to the same intervention. Consequently, researchers need to develop additional methods to meet the needs of the gifted student.

### Gifted Females: Literature Review

Gifted girls and women face special barriers that challenge, and often impede, their career development. This phenomenon has been demonstrated by Kerr (1995), who found that, as gifted females age, the gap widens between their career achievements and the career achievements of their male peers. From birth, women are exposed to a barrage of sex-role socialization and societal stereotypes that have taught them to be unassertive (Bell, 1989), to have low academic and career expectations (Schwartz, 1991), and to view the combination of career and family as a nearly unattainable goal (Silverman, 1989). In addition, self-esteem, an “important determinant of career aspirations,” declines among girls during adolescence (Kerr & Fisher, 1997, p. 260). Research has determined, therefore, that career counseling among gifted girls and women needs to address issues such as marriage and motherhood (Kerr, 1993), the impact of sex-role socialization (Hollinger, 1991), and self-esteem and self-efficacy (Schwartz, 1991). Furthermore, to overcome the multitude of societal and cultural barriers faced by gifted girls and women, researchers have emphasized the importance of role models (Silverman, 1989), reinforcement for persistence when pursuing goals (Schwartz, 1991), and help integrating multiple life roles (Hollinger, 1991). Researchers have also suggested the utility of alternative career assessment tools such as the “Perfect Day Future Fantasy” (Kerr, 1991) and the “Chances and Choices” card game (Hollinger, 1991). The purpose of these

assessment tools is to identify the gifted student's goals and values while introducing her to the complexities of adult life.

### Gifted Females: Critique

Researchers have thus identified the multitude of complex issues that face gifted females in our society. The career development path that gifted females follow has been clearly established, and researchers have identified the problem areas such as low self-esteem and sex role stereotypes. However, much of the intervention literature focuses on theory and hypotheses rather than empirical evidence. Efforts have clearly been made to develop career counseling methods that meet the needs of gifted females. To challenge the efficacy of the proposed interventions, longitudinal research should be conducted with gifted students. The longitudinal research would allow researchers to follow a group of gifted females from adolescence into adulthood, and thus factors such as underachievement and family obligations may be examined within the context of giftedness. Furthermore, additional research should be conducted to identify the intervention methods that are most effective in guiding the career development of gifted females. Based on this proposed research, career counselors will be able to provide gifted females with intervention and guidance designed to meet their needs.

### Gifted Minority Students: Literature Review

Another population who faces enormous barriers are minority gifted students. As noted by Olszewski-Kubilius and Scott (1992), these students may receive mixed messages from their family and friends about career achievement, thus limiting their aspirations. For instance, these minority students may feel especially strong pressure from their non-gifted peers not to perform well at school, or their parents may devalue the importance of higher

education (Olszewski-Kubilius & Scott, 1992). Furthermore, among disadvantaged gifted minority students, there is often a lack of minority role models who have achieved academically or occupationally (Kerr & Fisher, 1997). Unfortunately, there has been little research regarding the utility of career instruments or the generalizability of career theories for use with minorities (Koegel, Donin, Ponterotto, & Spitz, 1995). Clearly, however, gifted minority students share not only the concerns of all gifted students, but may also have to contend with racism, discrimination, and low teacher expectations (Kerr & Fisher, 1997). As such, researchers have begun to recognize the special needs of gifted minority students, such as additional guidance planning academic and occupational goals (Olszewski-Kubilius & Scott, 1992), to help them realize their potential.

#### Gifted Minority Students: Critique

During the 1990's, awareness of multiculturalism, and its influence on the field of counseling, has been growing rapidly (Essandoh, 1996). Interestingly, however, the research literature has paid very little attention to the career counseling needs of gifted minority students. Although researchers have noted the inutility of traditional career assessments with this population (e.g., Kerr & Fisher, 1997), few efforts have been made to develop appropriate tools. Furthermore, although researchers have detailed the specific barriers that gifted minority students face (e.g., racism, lack of role models, mixed messages from family and friends), few efforts have been made to address these issues so that this population can realize its potential, and its educational and occupational goals. Rather than suggesting possible interventions (e.g., Olszewski-Kubilius & Scott, 1992), future research should focus on the efficacy of the application of these interventions with gifted minority students. These efforts on behalf of

minority gifted students are vital because they will be integrate the needs of both gifted students (e.g., values-based interventions) and minority students (e.g., cultural and socioeconomic considerations), thus making them more appropriate for this population.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, then, it is clear that there remains much work to be done in the field of career counseling for gifted students. Although researchers have identified the myriad of barriers that face this population, only recently have they begun to develop solutions to these barriers. In the meantime, our gifted students are floundering: they have too many options and far too little guidance. To help alleviate this problem, teachers, counselors, and parents should be made aware of the unique barriers that gifted students must face, and of the important role that adults can play in the career development of these students. No student, even the most gifted and talented, can make informed career decisions without guidance and role models. Furthermore, occupational and educational choices are among the most important decisions that face an individual throughout his or her lifetime. As such, every student deserves to have access to career counseling techniques and assessments that are appropriate to his or her gender, race, and level of ability so that each individual can make informed career decisions.

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