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Mature Students Speak Up: Career Exploration and the Working Alliance

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Abstract

This exploratory study was undertaken to learn more about how mature students perceive the career counselling process in a post-secondary institution. Through the use of critical incident technique this study examined how three mature students interpret their relationship between themselves and their counsellors. Significant factors identified as contributing to a positive interpersonal connective bond were considering the whole of the clients' experience, integrating career and personal concerns, introducing assessment tools appropriately, and utilizing counsellor self-disclosure appropriately. This study highlights the importance of utilizing critical incident technique in career counselling, the importance of the working alliance for mature students, and identifies possible counselling applications to consider when working with this population.

Keywords: career counselling theory, college student development, qualitative research method, mature students, working alliance

The number of “mature students” entering higher education institutions in Canada is increasing because of changing demographics and the need for a highly trained workforce. Mature students are often considered to be adults over the age of 21 who pursue careers first before entering into undergraduate studies for the first time (Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009). These students differ from younger students in many ways; they view their educational needs differently, often experience a shift in self-identity (Mercer, 2007), and they have unique economic and personal demands (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

While mature students navigate their experience through university, they frequently struggle with career related questions; they question previous career choices (Tones et al., 2009) and have difficulty identifying future career identities (Stone, 2008). Career exploration is a service available in higher education institutions in Canada to help students understand how their values, goals, interests and abilities relate to their career choices (Sampson Jr., 2009). Career exploration is rooted in the history and progression of career development (Hughey, Nelson, Dammingier & McCalla-Wriggins, 2009) and it is studied in the context of career counselling or other counselling disciplines, including personal counselling (Hughey et al., 2009). It is unknown whether career exploration services meet the needs of mature students. Due to a high attrition rate in utilization of career services (Fouad, Guillen, Harris-Hodge, Novakovic, & Kantamneni, 2006) it is important to develop an understanding of how counsellors connect to mature students as this may be an important mediating variable.

The interpersonal processes that constitute the counselling alliance, also known as the “working alliance” (WA), provide a backdrop to examine how counsellors connect to mature students engaging in career counselling. The WA is a concept that defines the collaboration between a person who wishes to seek change and the individual who aids that person with this change (Bordin, 1979). The possible types of working alliances between counsellor and client can differ (Bedi & Duff, 2009), but a positive alliance is often an effective indicator of positive client change (Martin, Garske & Davies, 2000). In addition, client ratings of this relationship can be more indicative of client change than the counsellor’s ratings (Bedi, 2006).

The WA includes both affective elements and collaborative working elements; it can be considered to be comprised of three distinct parts (a)

transference and counter-transference, (b) the Rogerian alliance (bond, goal, and techniques) and (c) the interpersonal connective bond (Gelso & Carter, 1985). The interpersonal connective bond (ICB) is the connection between counsellor and client independent of their counselling work. Bedi, Davis and Arvay (2005) noted a gap in the literature on the interpersonal connective bond, specifically the lack of research on the client perspective on how this relationship is developed and maintained. This prompted them to examine this in an individual counselling context, while this study examined this phenomena in a career counselling context.

Within the field of career counselling, the WA is viewed as an important process variable. For example, clients who described having a positive WA in career counselling settings also identified having more future career prospects, increased life satisfaction (Masdonati, Massoudi & Rossier, 2009), and a decrease in career decision difficulties (Masdonati et al., 2013). Research in career counselling has focused on the WA, but to date no studies have examined the ICB in particular within a career counselling purview. As students may be stigmatized to view career counselling as structured and assessment based (Rochelen, Blazina & Raghunathan, 2002) understanding students' views of the ICB is imperative. As mature students associate better with professors and professionals, who become a form of support for these students (Stone, 2008), the ICB may be imperative to this sub-population.

This qualitative study was designed to investigate mature students' views of how this relationship is developed and maintained in order to help inform career counselling practices. Critical Incident Technique was used to help identify what helped and hindered the development of the ICB.

Method

Critical Incident Technique (CIT), a qualitative method first described by Flanagan (1954), was adopted for this study in order to help clients highlight counsellors' behaviours that helped or hindered the WA. CIT was chosen as it is an inductive, exploratory interview technique that helps extrapolate information when little is known about a topic (Bitner, Booms & Tetreault, 1990). In addition, CIT was chosen above other qualitative methodologies due to its distinct focus on drawing out participants'

reactions to situations (Bedi et al., 2005). For example, Flanagan (1954) stipulated that:

...an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequence are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects. (p. 327)

Therefore, through the use of CIT mature students will be able to reflect upon specific moments that had the definite outcome of enhancing or hindering the ICB from their personal perspective. CIT aims and provides a method to gather an in-depth understanding of specific incidents from the individual by exploring the behavioural, cognitive, and affective elements of the individual's response to the incident (Grempler, 2004). CIT has also previously been found useful in research examining the WA in individualized counselling (Bedi et al., 2005), but has not been used in career counselling research. In this study, CIT's focus on "incidents" (e.g., counsellor's effective or ineffective behaviours), provided the ability to examine specific moments mature students noticed that influenced the development, maintenance and degradation of the ICB.

Participants

Mature students were eligible for this pilot study if they were at least 21 years of age, were classified as a mature student by the university, and had received a minimum of two or more 50 minute career counselling sessions before participating in the study, including at least one session within the past month from the date of the interview. A career counselling session was defined as being focused on discussing career paths, goals, aspirations, during which the participant engage in a career assessment. It did not entail resume writing or helping participants find employment. At this university, the career counselling services were distinctly separate from individual counselling services; the mandate of the centre was a focus on career and not personal counselling.

Participants had a mean age of 38, included two females and one male, and were all undergraduate first year students and residents of Canada. Participants each had three career sessions and each worked with a different

counsellor at the same agency, each specialist having a counselling background. All participants saw only one career counsellor and only two participants had previous career counselling experience.

Procedure

Students were recruited via “word of mouth” at a Canadian University career counselling office where they were asked to participate in a study examining the relationship between counsellor and client as it developed during the counselling sessions. Participants provided written consent and completed a demographic questionnaire before engaging in a 75 minute semi-structured audio-taped interview conducted by the researcher. To identify critical incidents, the following text was read twice (once for “helping” categories and another for “hindering” categories) to identify critical incidents:

Try to recall the relationship that developed and how it progressed throughout each session you had with your counsellor. What were/are areas that you believe helped/hindered develop and strengthen/weaken the relationship between you and the counsellor? I am interested in specific examples that you can describe in as much detail as possible.

Probing questions such as “How did this improve or hinder the relationship” and “If this [incident] did/didn’t occur would it have impacted the relationship?” were asked as necessary. Critical incidents were identified as important if their lack of occurrence would have impacted the WA from the students’ perspective.

Analysis

The audio-taped interviews were transcribed and stripped of identifying information; the pseudonyms Sally, Mickey (females) and Bubba (male) were used. Analysis followed an inductive process of categorization as suggested by Hughes and coauthors (2007). Briefly, each transcription was read and then re-read, and critical incidents were extracted from each participant’s account and transcribed onto cue cards. Definitions were

created to classify each incident and similarities and differences were extrapolated from the cue cards in order to create broader categories for each interview. To ensure integrity of the qualitative approach in this study, Yardley's (2000) criteria of sensitivity to context was considered; sensitivity was demonstrated through inclusion of verbatim extracts, commitment through in-depth exposure to the data-set and cross-referencing data analysis with a second researcher throughout the study. Where needed, redefinition of incidents occurred after sections of coding were re-analyzed by the second researcher. Finally incidents that respondents reported, or were interpreted, as related to ICB were selected for write-up. In order to assess the interpretation of the data (Vivar, 2007) participants were e-mailed a summary of the incidents and asked to respond if they felt a need to expand upon, or disagreed with, the analysis. All participants responded noting the incidents were an accurate fit, no expansions were provided.

Findings

Participants identified several incidents that illustrate their views of counsellors' behaviours that helped or hindered the development of the ICB. Participants were generally positive about their recent sessions.

Behaviours that Helped the ICB

Counsellor as respectful and a guide

In order for the working bond to develop, participants noted that counsellors needed to guide conversation and encourage the participant to be receptive and open. Participants reported that although they maintained the primary ability to decide if they wanted to "open up that gate and let the other person really figure out how to get to the heart of the matter..." (Mickey), guiding the conversation helped them become familiar with the process. Participants noted feeling anxious and nervous at the start, but as the counsellor asked broad, engaging questions they felt they could become more open in session. Mickey suggested that "there [are] a lot of interviewing questions and that sort of thing that comes from the other side [i.e. the counsellor] that need to happen" for participants to feel receptive to

the relationship. When queried, Mickey noted these included open-ended questions but could not elaborate in detail.

Participants felt they were treated with respect and a sense of equality, a theme that stood out as important to helping them feel receptive to the career process. For example, Sally stated “Respect, absolute bottom line... no matter where a person is coming from, a single mother on welfare, who cares, that’s no less a person than someone who has a PhD.” Participants reported feeling respected when they noticed their counsellor was listening to them. Paraphrasing was a powerful tool identified by participants that helped them feel respected. Sally indicated, “I can tell [the counsellor] is listening to me because of the way [he/she] is paraphrasing what I’m saying, It tells me [he/she] heard me”.

Career discussed in context of whole person

A focus on creating individualized sessions helped participants feel comfortable in session. They identified this as a major factor that should be focused on in order to connect with non-traditional students. Sally noted, “It was by making it about me as a mature, experienced student and listening to those stories that was helpful.” Focusing on the whole person and their life experiences resonated as an important incident. Mickey commented that career is “a big part of your life,” but it was important to explore the personal contexts of an individual’s life and navigate how these influence career paths to get “a whole picture of me and not just my career self”.

Ways in which counsellors were able to include the whole person were: (a) asking questions that were not purely centered on career-related endeavours, (b) making past life experiences relevant to current career work, (c) taking an interest in mental health related issues and (d) providing individualized career assessment results that integrated individual participant feedback into the results. Bubba noted, “He/she was interested in what I was saying about my life, my anxiety, my stress...” For Mickey, it was the belief that the counsellor “cared about me actually figuring out what I needed to figure out at the time.”

Counsellor self-disclosure

Participants reported that when their counsellor shared a piece of personal information, such as discussing a vacation, education, or speaking to commonalities they had with the participant, this created a brief and more intimate conversational engagement that allowed participants to feel comfortable in session. It provided Bubba, for example, with a sense of real connection: “Wow, a real conversation.” Sally described an incident that created a sense of connection for her:

He/she had some pictures of places he’s/she’s been so they were really beautiful...I asked if he/she had been to those places and she/he said yes and told me where they were and that was all... I think it takes it to a little more of a personal level... It was more personal, we were very engaged...

For Sally, this shared conversation “made the environment more comfortable” and gave her more opportunities to be open, creating a “connection” between her and the counsellor. Mickey identified the relationship as “a situational kind of thing...building a rapport is fairly one-on-one and not going to be the same for every person.” She noted that “the counsellor wasn’t cold about his/her own situation. I asked him/her about his/her education in the first session and he/she was very open about his/her educational and personal life...”

Shared conversations that occurred outside of sessions were also enjoyed by participants. For example, participants liked to be acknowledged by their counsellor outside of the professional environment. When acknowledged in this manner, it gave the participant a greater sense of importance and created a personal versus professional connection. Mickey provided an example:

I run into him/her on campus all the time and it’s like “Hey, how are you, how are things going?” We definitely are not taking just a professional interest in each other but more of a personal one too...I think for me personally this was something that I needed so I could kind of let that trust build. It’s a huge thing.

Another form of self-disclosure that helped participants feel connected, relaxed, and open was when the counsellor admitted their mistakes and clarified misunderstandings. For example, Mickey noted the importance of when her counsellor apologized for forgetting “some things about me” and “it made [the counsellor] seem more human, I get that he/she sees a lot of people a day.” These actions helped to establish a sense of equality between the participant and the counsellor, a factor that stood out for participants as imperative to a positive WA.

Incorporating non-verbal and verbal behaviours

Certain non-verbal and verbal behaviours were identified that enhanced the relationship. Non-verbal behaviours of the counsellor included smiling, eye contact, shaking clients’ hands, having an open stance in session, and face-to-face discussion. These were considered minor actions that could further enhance the relationship because they often made the counsellor appear personable, kind, and friendly but were only beneficial when they did not occur excessively; Sally noted, “He/she looked me in the eyes when I was talking, which I appreciated. I mean not like peering into my soul but just eye contact.” Although non-verbal signals were beneficial, it should be noted cultural contexts that might mediate the experience of behaviours like eye contact were not explored in this research.

Counsellors’ verbal behaviours that helped participants feel relaxed in session included speaking in a friendly manner, being articulate, using non-judgemental words, not being demeaning, and having a respectful tone. Tone of voice was the only verbal behavior described in depth and appeared to have a strong influence on how participants interpreted their counsellor’s responses to questions. For example, Sally noted, “I think his/her tone... talking slow and in a nice voice, not too sharp and no indication of “you should know that” hints in his/her voice made me feel accepted...”

Behaviours that Hindered the WA

Participants identified two specific counsellors’ behaviors (from current or past relationships) that hindered the development of a positive ICB.

Career assessment information giving

Within the university career setting, career assessment is an integral part of the process (Harris-Bowlsbey, 2003). At this University specifically testing was a standard practice during the second appointment. Participants stated that they were not provided enough information about the testing process prior to being requested to engage in it, which created a sense of uncertainty and decreased their trust in their counsellor. Participants noted a fear of being, as Mickey put it, “pigeonholed”. Each participant perceived prior to the assessment that the testing process would diminish the importance of the one-on-one experience. For example, Bubba was worried about being classified as an “A or B type” that would dictate his career path, and Mickey expressed concerns that it would be “this group thing and you’re in group A or group B or group C”.

Participants noted wanting more information up front about the use of the assessment tool and how it was relevant to them as mature students. They indicated that had they been requested to take the tests in the first session without a chance for the ICB to develop they would not have returned due to the anxiety the testing caused. By engaging in the testing in the second session, although the lack of information created a sense of fear and anxiety, they were still able to “give them one more shot at least because they tried the first time I met them” (Mickey). Bubba noted that “more information up front would make sure I want to do it and come back.”

Limitations to self-disclosure

Participants noted that too much self-disclosure or advice giving from the counsellor was not appreciated and negatively impacted the relationship. Participants identified not experiencing this with their current counsellors, but with past counsellors who disclosed too much information. The negotiating line between too much self-disclosure and not enough was balanced by simply responding to Sally’s questions: “He/She answered what I wanted to know... It was just straightforward and it was good.” In previous career experiences, Sally described being given bad advice and feeling judged by the counsellor. She described her former counsellor as

providing her with too much self-disclosure when the information contained the counsellor's biases and value statements.

Discussion and Implications

This study adds to existing literature by emphasizing that the ICB in the WA is an important concept to consider when working with mature students seeking career counselling. Although this study focuses on three participants' stories, and is not generalizable to the population, it provides a backdrop for future research and highlights the importance of understanding mature students' needs in seeking career counselling. The focus on each individual perspective allowed for a richer, more detailed analysis of each case, prioritizing depth and quality over quantity (Smith et al., 2009). Three cases provided a starting point to examining the importance of studying this topic.

This study highlighted similarities to past research; that the interpersonal bond is imperative to the counselling process (Masdonati et al., 2009) and that specific verbal and non-verbal behaviours were identified as helping enhance the relationship when they were used appropriately (Duff and Bedi, 2010). For example, eye contact and having an open stance in session corroborate with Bedi and authors (2005) findings that facing the client squarely, openly and with eye contact is important to creating a positive bond.

This study also illustrated several important features that stood out for mature students, specifically: the importance of creating an individualized process, focusing on the person's whole story (as one might in individual counselling), and the use of appropriate self-disclosure. Creating a connection with a mature student through these factors may help these students associate better with the career counsellor, as they do with professors who share similar life experiences (Kasworm, 2010). These same features may be important to younger students as well, yet mature students are known to find more support from professionals than fellow students (Stone, 2008) which could indicate that a strong ICB is imperative to exploring one's career identity.

The participants' desires to be seen as a whole person are also in accordance to Amundson's (2003) statement that factors such as family, leisure, and spirituality should be considered in career counselling in order

to enhance career work. This inclusion of participants life stories allowed them to create a healthy relationship with their career counsellor, and a healthy supportive connection with a professional often aids in life transitions (Schlossberg, 2011). Finally, these factors identified may have implications for practice and the way in which career counselling is conducted; these are discussed below.

Implications of the Whole Perspective

A focus on creating an individualized process that engages the whole participant and their life story has implications for how counsellors plan their sessions when working with mature students seeking career counselling. In a career exploration process, this may require shifting away from the career counselling notion of interventions being planned and guided by assessments (Harris-Bowlsbey, 2003) and to focus on the individualized process. This has implications for practice as it would mean moving towards a process that includes integrative models of therapy into career counselling, the merits of which have been contested (Amundson, 2006; Bedi, 2004). Although this study is limited by being small and participants are from a single centre, the results support the importance of integrative models, and illustrate that a strict career focus in career assessment may not fit when working with mature students seeking career counselling. It is possible that using an individualized process at the first session might encourage consistency of attendance in subsequent sessions, by reducing anxiety and worry about stigma (Rochlen, Milburn & Hill, 2004), and thus reduce client drop out (Rochelen, Blazina & Raghunathan, 2002). Further research is needed to explore these issues for mature students.

Implications of Utilization of Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure in counselling is reported to be widely practiced by therapists (Edwards & Murdock 1994), although it is unknown as to what is the “correct” level of disclosure, and if it should be utilized (see Henretty & Levitt, 2010 for overview of the debate about whether disclosure is indeed useful). This study illustrates that appropriate self-disclosure may be beneficial when connecting with mature students seeking career

counselling. For example, self-disclosure in this study helped reduce the gap between student and counsellor, reducing mature students' feelings of "otherness" (Kasworm, 2010), and creating a safe way for participants to connect to the counsellor over shared experiences. This has implications for counsellors, as it suggests a better need to understand how to appropriately use self-disclosure, as participants noted it can be damaging as well as beneficial to the relationship.

Three positive usages of self-disclosure were identified, which may be imperative for practitioners to incorporate into their counselling when working with mature students in a career setting: (a) an opening welcoming environment that contains a few images of the counsellor's life but is not cluttered, (b) sharing one's educational and life experiences for the purposes of normalizing a client's life circumstances (versus teaching), and (c) acknowledging clients outside of the therapy office. These factors, although needing further research, could help current practitioners develop a welcoming environment for mature students in post-secondary settings where they feel alienated and marginalized.

Critical Incident Technique

A strength of this study was the use of CIT (Flanagan, 1954) in an educational setting as a research method to help allow participants to identify illustrative examples of helpful and unhelpful practices in developing the WA. CIT provided mature students a concrete way to voice what specific behaviours their counsellors were engaging in that were positive or negative in developing a relationship with them. Though these results are tentative due to the small sample size, CIT provides a preliminary examination of counsellor variables that help develop a strong alliance and specific ones to avoid when working with this population. Variables which merit further exploration in a career context. Used with a larger sample, CIT may help to identify and create a platform to form a checklist of specific skills and behaviours career counsellors should consider when interacting with mature students. Future research should consider utilizing CIT for larger scale career studies in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of these important barriers and facilitators to developing a positive relationship between mature student and their career counsellor.

Although this study was based on a single researcher's interpretation, CIT helped keep the researcher true to the participants' stories as incidents were well illustrated by the participants. A limitation to consider for future studies is the accuracy of the incidents; the stories told by participants were retrospective, with participants recalling the experience after it occurred. However, according to Flanagan (1954), CIT can be useful in retrospective interviews and these still provides rich data. In conclusion, this study provides support for further, more extensive research to explore the needs of mature students in career counselling. This study has noted the importance of an integrated model in practice and the use of appropriate self-disclosure when connecting to mature students specifically, and has provided a pilot study illustrating the use and benefits of CIT as a qualitative method in career counselling research.

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