Enhancing Social Justice by Promoting Prosocial Values in Career Development Interventions

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In career counseling, social justice is typically integrated by helping oppressed groups navigate their way around obstacles of injustice while also working to dislodge the oppressive conditions from society. The authors affirm both of these courses of action while also advocating a third strategy: inviting clients to serve as agents of change by introducing and incorporating prosocial values into career development interventions. This article makes the case that this strategy may enhance client well-being while simultaneously promoting harmony among organizations and society. Support for this strategy comes from theory, research, and the ethical approaches for working with values in counseling.

Keywords: career counseling, vocational psychology, social justice, prosocial values, calling

Work is a core aspect of life for most adults and represents for many their most stinging encounter with social injustice (Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005). Although vocational psychology arguably originated with efforts to meet the needs of the oppressed (e.g., Blocher, 2000; Savickas & Baker, 2005), the struggles of those facing constrained opportunities have often been overlooked. Recently, the field has more explicitly pushed to address this concern, as evidenced by several prominent articles exploring social justice themes within theory, research, practice, and policy (e.g., Blustein, 2008; Fassinger, 2008). Social justice themes in the literature have centered on the role of social, economic, and cultural factors and how these factors exert differing influences on diverse groups, creating obstructions for some groups (e.g., women, racial and ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and persons with disabilities). Two traditions emerged focusing on individual-level and societal-level ways of tackling injustice. The former has included recommendations for how counselors could work with clients to effectively cope with barriers to their career development (Blustein et al., 2005); the latter has advocated a macrolevel perspective targeting public policy as a means through which to stimulate change within broader social systems in structures that perpetuate inequalities (e.g., Blustein, 2006; Fassinger, 2008).

We affirm the importance of both of these levels of change for helping individuals experience autonomy, dignity, and justice in the midst of oppression, while also helping dislodge oppression's root causes. However,

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working toward social justice on either the individual level or the societal level must not be purely forward-looking; we must recognize the bitter lessons that may have been learned by people who have been past victims of oppression and injustice. Constricted educational and occupational opportunities may foster a sense of helplessness or may result in the internalization of negative feelings about one's self. Counselors must act with compassion and sincere altruistic concern. Acknowledging and empathizing with clients' pain is particularly relevant to career counseling with people who have been oppressed, helping them gain resolution for past injustices and preparing them to look ahead to brighter futures.

At the same time, there is more that counseling professionals can do to promote social justice than facilitating healing and coping strategies at the individual level and advocating for fair public policy at the societal level. In this article, we submit a third strategy for how career counselors might address inequality and injustice in the work world: incorporating discussions of *prosocial values* into work with clients. Such discussions center on helping clients explicitly address questions about how their work may influence the greater good, which we conceptualize as an outcome of a society striving for harmony (i.e., societal balance in which individual needs produce results that create the best possible societal outcomes; Crethar, Torres Rivera, & Nash, 2008). Many counselors are driven to toward social injustice by similarly held prosocial values, as well as by prosocial emotions such as empathy and compassion. Helping lead clients—even those who themselves are victims of oppression—to consider such values and their emotional drivers empowers an ever-widening circle of social justice advocates. In short, we advocate a counseling stance in which clients are actively encouraged to approach their work in ways that promote the greater good.

For the sake of efficiency, we refer to values of enhancing societal well-being or the greater good through one's work experiences as prosocial values in career development. Prosocial values in one's work encompass a wide range of specific strategies that can be expressed uniquely across individual career paths. For example, garbage truck operators could reframe their work in terms of essential public health functions; entrepreneurs developing new consumer products can consider both marketability and social value rather than just the former.

Benefits of Promoting Prosocial Work Values for Clients

Prosocial valuation and career counseling can work together harmoniously, as shown by a legacy of theory and research demonstrating the beneficial effects of prosocial work engagement for individual clients. For example, the concept of *social fit* dates at least to Plato and refers to the fit between a person's abilities and the requirements of a particular social need (Muirhead, 2004). This aspect of fit is consonant with theologian Frederick Buechner's (1973) oft-cited description of work as a *calling*: "the place where your deep

gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (p. 95). Scholarship on calling has, in fact, experienced a resurgence in recent years (Dik & Duffy, 2009), and prosocial motives are a consistent theme that cuts across prevailing definitions of the term (Duffy & Dik, 2009). Scholarship also has targeted the role of prosocial motivation among employees in organizational contexts (e.g., Grant, 2009). Although space constraints preclude a thorough review, both of these traditions of viewing people's careers in terms of their fit with social needs converge: Pursuing work as a calling and working from prosocial motivations are related to, and may cause, considerable personal benefits.

There are many examples of this scholarship from which to choose. For example, service employees who perceived that their work benefited others seemed to be protected from burnout and dissatisfaction (Grant & Campbell, 2007). Also, having contact with beneficiaries of one's work increased motivation and performance among telephone solicitors (Grant, 2008). Among college students, wanting one's work to help others was often espoused as a primary determinant of career choice and was related to greater career optimism and adaptability (Duffy & Raque-Bogdan, 2010; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). Among adults, this desire predicted higher levels of helping behavior (Rioux & Penner, 2001), cooperation (Colquitt, 2004), job performance (Bing & Burroughs, 2001), and satisfaction with work tasks irrespective of rewards (King, Miles, & Day, 1993). Furthermore, evidence suggests that "job crafting"—shaping the task, relational, and cognitive parameters of one's work in ways that may enhance a sense of contribution to others' well-being—typically results in an increased sense of meaningfulness (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Research is needed to examine such relationships as a function of demographic variables representing the full array of human diversity, particularly given that most studies on these topics have investigated disproportionately White and relatively affluent participants. However, it is difficult for us to imagine conditions in which prosocial values would prove harmful for any demographic group.

Is Explicitly Promoting Prosocial Work Values Ethical?

Some readers may question whether explicitly promoting prosocial values in counseling is ethical, tantamount to imposing counselor values on the client. Although at one time the notion of value-neutral counseling was discussed as a goal, research has demonstrated that counseling is inherently value-laden (e.g., Patterson, 1989; Worthington, 1993). If this is so, then being clear about one's values is critical for counselors (e.g., Yarhouse & VanOrman, 1999). The ethical principle of beneficence (i.e., the aim to do good and help others) translates into the counseling context in terms of what counselors and clients understand to be a good outcome (Tjeltveit, 2006). Beneficial outcomes are tied to people's ideas about the good life and good society, which Blustein et al. (2005) noted should be explicitly envisioned in the counseling context. Given the theoretically and empirically supported benefits of prosocial values to clients, and our assumption that promoting

social justice is a universal good, our view of a beneficial outcome in career counseling is one in which individuals are engaged in a meaningful work pursuit that provides an opportunity to use their abilities for the direct or indirect advancement of social harmony. Discussing this vision openly with clients empowers them to choose whether to work with a counselor holding such values. We encourage career counselors to disclose what they consider to be a beneficial outcome and a good life during the earliest stages of the counseling relationship.

Potential Societal Benefits of Client Prosocial Work Values

Each year, thousands of individuals are served by career counselors, and we argue that these interactions can be a way to build social justice through the promotion of prosocial work values. This contention is based on our beliefs that (a) the promotion of social justice is a universal good and individuals (including counselors) should consider any setting as an opportunity to do so and (b) engaging in prosocial work-related activities will have a positive effect on individuals and their work environments and broader contexts. The first belief is centered on the fundamental principles of counseling (Crethar et al., 2008) and the second on empirical data, some of which we reviewed earlier. Thus far, we have focused on the potential benefits for individuals who endow their work with prosocial values; they appear more optimistic and adaptable in their careers, are happier and more productive at work, and help develop happier and more productive employees. Next, we explore how the translation of prosocial values into workplace behaviors also benefits others, ranging from coworkers to the indirect or direct beneficiaries of work and, ultimately, to the well-being of society as a whole.

One reason that working from a prosocial valuation seems to yield benefits appears to derive from the fact that such people take into account two perspectives on their careers: what is best for *them* and what is best for *others*. Unfortunately, the latter may be a distant priority for many clients who have been raised in an American culture that prizes individualism. How often do counselors hear that clients are choosing careers based not on personal fulfillment and satisfaction but on what would be best for society? Indeed, this is probably pretty rare. Yet, we know that people who are actively engaged in improving themselves and reaching out to others experience greater well-being and meaning in life (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008).

Career counselors have a unique opportunity to promote a work life that respects both clients' own personal needs and the needs of society. By doing so, counselors may be able to directly and indirectly promote social justice by encouraging their clients to be agents of social change. Imagine the impact on society if people enter the workforce driven by a strong desire not only to achieve their personal aspirations but also to use their careers to help others.

Take, for example, the hypothetical case of Maria. Maria embraced prosocial values in her career as a loan officer. In her new position at a suburban bank,

she felt energized to search for opportunities to engage in prosocial activities. For example, she became acutely aware that the customers she interviewed for business loans were primarily Caucasian men, which did not reflect the full richness and diversity in the bank's multicultural neighborhood. Rather than grappling with whether such concerns are part of her job, Maria felt empowered to approach the branch manager with a plan to tailor customer outreach plans targeting the broad scope of diversity reflected among potential small business owners in the neighborhood. Through her deeper construal of her work, she made a positive impact on future home buyers and entre-preneurs who may have been shut out of the bank's previous operations. In turn, she felt better about herself and her job and became more satisfied and successful in her work over time. Her example, and perhaps even her individual mentoring and supervision, also hold the potential to encourage other employees to engage the prosocial aspects of their work. This type of trickle-down impact may be the best opportunity career counselors have to be agents of social justice through their day-to-day work. In the following section, we focus on what promoting prosocial values within career counsel-ing might actually look like.

Strategies for Promoting Prosocial Values in Career Counseling

Prosocial values differ from social interests (Holland, 1997) in that they can be pursued across the full scope of occupations rather than only certain careers (e.g., teaching, social service). This is supported by evidence that a significant percentage of even those in jobs not directly involved in social service express prosocial values when discussing their work (Colby, Sippola, & Phelps, 2001). One strategy for promoting prosocial values is moving be-yond traditional considerations of person–environment fit to also incorporate social fit (Dik, Duffy, & Eldridge, 2009; Muirhead, 2004). For example, among clients looking to choose or change a career path, counselors can explore client beliefs about which type of needs are most salient in the clients' local community or larger society and where within the identified range of needs they view themselves as best able (currently or potentially) to contribute. A second strategy is to broaden the scope of jobs considered to be of pro-social value. Although all areas of work have social implications, it is not always easy to see how some jobs contribute to the promotion of harmony. However, even those in highly stigmatized (e.g., miners, bill collectors) and highly repetitive jobs often derive meaning from their work by focusing on its social function (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Isaksen, 2000; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). We encourage broad thinking about what it means to make a difference through work, focusing on both direct and indirect means of enhancing societal well-being.

A third strategy builds on work by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) and Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) and is relevant for clients who are unable to change their current career circumstance. The focus is on subjectively

transforming (e.g., reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing) one's work experience in ways that increase its prosocial salience. For example, clients might explore the broader occupational mission of one's job ("hotel cleaning staff make people's stays pleasant and comfortable"), amplify its social function ("miserable hotel stays make for miserable vacations or business meetings"), or consider the hypothetical impact if no one did that work (this could range from "no early check-ins" to "the spread of disease"). Thinking about one's work in a broader context often helps people realize their work makes a meaningful difference.

Finally, it is important to note that many clients' work lives may be negatively affected by oppression, discriminatory practices, and cultural barriers, resulting in a fractured emotional state related to the working world. These clients will have lived through a work system that has been restrictive and inequitable, as opposed to being prosocial in nature. We encourage counselors working with these clients to fully explore the emotions associated with enduring such oppressive systems and, in turn, examine how these experiences might be a foundation for future prosocial endeavors. By being an advocate for others, these counselors may be one more step in stemming the system of oppression that persists in workplaces in the United States. As we have tried to model throughout this article, viewing work in this way should also give people an opportunity both to help others and to improve their own experience with work and life.

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