

Purpose-Centered Career Development: A Strengths-Based Approach to Finding Meaning and Purpose in Careers

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Although having a sense of purpose and meaning in life has been found to play an important role in overall life and career satisfaction, this is not an area that is typically cultivated during career exploration activities. In an effort to satisfy this need, this article provides a model for aiding students in developing a sense of purpose in their career search through a strengths-based framework. The authors present five key elements that reinforce the development of purpose, including: identity, self-efficacy, metacognition, culture, and service. Each element is defined, relevant research is provided, and strategies for promoting each element are discussed. Additionally, the relationship between purpose-centered career development and the career standards of the ASCA National Model® is presented.

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In some ways, “work” was an easier problem to solve in past centuries than in the present. For much of our history as a species, the tasks that once constituted the constant, daily activities of survival *were* our work. Assuring safety, food, water, and shelter for the members of our groups and societies took dedicated and tangible effort. As people specialized into niches, their work often became both further removed from survival and more closely linked to their identities. The Millers milled, the Bakers baked, and the Meisters directed the hubbub. The world of work has grown much more complex and specialized, with many of our emerging professions orienting around abstract products and services far removed from the historical tasks of our species. To succeed, young adults need to identify a line of work and a reason for working that can sustain them through challenging, remotely associated tasks (e.g., why do I need to know calculus to design a cabinet?) and protracted educational and degree-related endeavors. An exciting perspective toward work is emerging that holds substantial promise for helping students link their personal strengths in identifying and persisting in their pursuit of satisfying career options. This perspective focuses on the role of purpose.

Purpose refers to people’s identification of highly valued, over-arching goals, the attainment of which is anticipated to move people closer to achieving their true potential and bring them deep fulfillment (Steger, in press). Purpose is important because it provides people with a bridge from the present to future aspirations and accomplishments. Most research on purpose has focused on purpose as a component of living a meaningful life; in other words, how much people think their lives overall are endowed with a sense of mission and overarching goals. Extensive research has demonstrated that people with a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life experience greater happiness and fewer psychological problems (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger, in press; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, in press). People who feel their lives are full of meaning report less workaholism and better work adjustment (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenman, 2000), and college students high in meaning in life express greater certainty regarding their future occupation (Tryon & Razdin, 1972). People also identify work as an important, and in some cases the most important, source of meaning in their lives (Baum & Stewart, 1990; Klinger, 1977).

More recently, scholars and practitioners have endeavored to find a place for purpose in work. Purpose is thought to be central to people’s satisfaction in their work lives and career, particularly among those people who view their careers as something more than simply a way to make money. People who approach their work as a source of meaning are expected to be more deeply engaged with their jobs, work more effectively in teams, commit more strongly to their employment, and derive greater satisfaction from their toil (Steger & Dik, in press). Much of this research has been done under the auspices of the concept of calling. Calling refers to the contribution of work to people’s meaning and purpose in life, as well as the importance of making a valuable contribution to the greater good, such as contributing to God’s work or the needs of society (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Dik & Duffy, in press). People who approach work in this way report greater well-being both among working adults (e.g., Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) and among college students still preparing for their profession (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). College students who are actively working on

goals related to developing their calling in work report higher career decision self-efficacy, more intrinsic motivations to work, and greater meaning in life (Dik, Sargent, & Steger, in press).

The role of purpose among adolescents and young adults largely has been neglected. This is particularly true with regard to their career development. We argue that purpose can be a central strength in sowing the seeds for the development of satisfying, sustaining careers, particularly among high school students. Erikson's (1968) prominent model of development proposed that in adolescence, individuals are trying to establish their identities and self-concepts. Identity is thought to be a critical component of personal meaning systems, along with the development of significant goals and purposes (Dittman-Kohli & Westerhof, 2000). It is during this stage that people begin to dedicate themselves to abstract beliefs and purposes (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Damon et al. concluded from their review of the literature that meaning and purpose are central to adolescent lives. Thus, there should be a rich, reciprocal relationship between the development of identity and the development of purpose throughout adolescence. Ideally this process is nurtured and young adults emerge from this stage with a strong sense of identity and a sense of purpose toward their future work that they can use to persevere through the hurdles standing between them and meaningful work.

Extending the role of purpose to career counseling and guidance is a logical step for school counselors who adopt a strengths-based approach; helping students find purpose requires examining students' strengths and resources in their cultural contexts. According to Galassi and Akos (2007), school counselors who employ a strengths-based philosophy in their work are proactive, promote student development, and aid students in enhancing their personal assets. A purpose-centered approach to career development overlaps with strengths-based counseling in that both perspectives help students to explore and understand their strengths; this includes promoting student identity, an understanding of self, and the role that culture and service play in career development. Damon and colleagues (2003) defined purpose as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (p. 121). By focusing on purpose in career development, counselors aid students in defining work that is both personally meaningful and serves a broader objective or the "world beyond self," which includes their local community or the global community. Our purpose-centered approach to career development focuses on five key elements that reinforce the development of purpose: identity, self-efficacy, metacognition, culture, and service.

ELEMENTS OF THE PURPOSE-CENTERED APPROACH

The central task of adolescence is *identity* development, and the formation of one's occupational identity is a fundamental challenge of Erikson's (1963) Identity vs. Role Confusion stage of development. Furthermore, identity development and career decision-making have been closely linked, in that individuals who possess well-developed career interests and/or determination display a stronger sense of identity (e.g. Blustein, Devenis, & Kidney, 1989; Wehying, Bartlett, & Howard, 1984; Valliant & Valliant, 1981). Conversely, individuals who struggle with their identity development tend to struggle with career identity and decision-making (e.g. Cohen, Chartrand, & Jowdy, 1995). A purpose-centered approach to career development facilitates students' active engagement in identity formation by providing students with opportunities that focus on career and personal exploration. It is recommended that traditional career and personality inventories be used along with small group discussions specifically designed to allow students both to evaluate the meaning of inventories and to explore meaningful topics like, "Who am I," "What are my goals," and "How can I achieve my goals?" When students engage in meaningful dialogue with peers and adults, it helps them gain insight about the types of careers that could provide them with a sense of purpose for their work.

Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's abilities, is an important construct in career exploration and career decision-making. Research has demonstrated that an individual's sense self-efficacy influences their career choice, their performance, and their persistence (Betz, 2004). Betz contends that "the effects of self-efficacy on persistence are essential for long-term pursuit of one's goals in the face of obstacles..." (p. 342). In a purpose-centered approach to career development self-efficacy gives students the confidence to pursue purposeful and meaningful careers. We recommend providing students with opportunities to identify their academic and work-related strengths through engaging in traditional career exploration, exploring their strengths and limitations in areas that are broadly necessary for career success (e.g. organization, time management, etc.) and identifying opportunities to match the areas in which they feel efficacious with the careers that can bring them purpose in their work.

Metacognition, or self-awareness of one's own thinking processes, is an essential skill in the development of vocational decision-making. Metacognition consists of knowledge of cognition and regulation of cognition. Knowledge of cognition consists of knowledge of one's abilities, knowledge of strategy implementation, and determination of when/why strategy use is appropriate, whereas regulation consists of "taking action, implementing strategies, and acting on feedback from the knowledge one has" (Batha & Carroll, 2007, p. 65). These metacognitive concepts relate to career

development because they require self-appraisal of one's abilities, the ability to appraise tasks, and the ability to strategize ways to work through a task (Jacobs & Paris, 1987). The importance of metacognition to career development is emphasized by the research of Symes and Stewart (1999) who found a significant relationship between metacognition and vocational decidedness; those who displayed higher levels of metacognitive activity also demonstrated higher levels of vocational decidedness in comparison to those with lower levels of metacognition. In addition, research has demonstrated a relationship between metacognitive awareness and decision-making and the role that metacognitive instruction plays in improving decision-making (Batha & Carroll, 2007). A purpose-centered approach to career development recognizes the importance of metacognitions and the role they play in regulating students's career decision-making strategies and pursuit of a purposeful career. We recommend that counselors and/or teachers implement strategies that encourage students to think about their cognitive processes by reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses and developing effective strategies for career decision-making and pursuing specific careers.

Culture plays a multifaceted role in career development that is unique to each individual. Culture in this context refers to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, geographic location, socioeconomic status, disability, belief systems, values, etc. Students need to comprehend the role that their culture plays on their career choices and how their career choices, consequently, impacts their culture—whether it be a financial, geographic, lifestyle, status, etc. Young, Marshall, and Valach (2007) call for establishing a link between career and culture. They explain that engagement in culture happens through actions, projects, and career and that these areas serve to construct one's culture. A purpose-centered approach to career development recognizes the bidirectional influence of culture and career and aids students in recognizing the role that their culture plays in their career choices, and respectively, how their future career will impact their culture. We believe that culture helps shape which careers seem likely to provide students with a sense of purpose. The objective is to provide students with opportunities to engage in the exploration of cultural constructs in a career framework. In small group settings, for example, students explore how their career choices will impact their cultural values and vice versa.

The final area that this approach promotes is that of *service* for the greater good and recognizing how one's career contributes to family and society. This concept is drawn directly from theories of purpose (e.g., Damon et al., 2003) and theories of calling (e.g., Dik & Duffy, in press), as well as the recognition that one's work plays a role beyond earning a paycheck by serving the needs of others (Neal, 2000). A purpose-centered approach to career development emphasizes the importance of helping students recognize the significance of giving back and to explore the ways that their chosen career fulfills this role. Conversely, students should recognize ways in which their career of interest may hinder their ability to assist the greater good.

RELATIONSHIP TO ASCA NATIONAL MODEL

The ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association 2005) promotes that students (a) acquire the skills to investigate career in relation to knowledge of self, (b) employ strategies to achieve career goals, and (c) understand the relationship between personal qualities, education, training and work. A purpose-centered career development approach addresses each of these areas. The first standard is addressed by aiding students in the formation of their identity and helping them to understand the link between development of self and career which requires self-exploration, understanding of one's skills and abilities, and a sense of self-efficacy of one's capabilities. The second standard is addressed in that the strategies utilized in this approach are inclusive, exploratory, and experiential. This incorporates reflecting on the role that academic achievement and postsecondary education or training plays in reaching one's career goals. The third standard is addressed through culture and purpose where students examine the bidirectional influence of culture and career and are directed to investigate the extent to which their career of choice contributes to family, society, and the greater good.

CONCLUSION

In closing, the purpose-centered approach to career development promotes identity development, metacognitive awareness, and self-efficacy as a means for discovering self-truths and understanding the role of culture and service as a means for understanding the context of career in regards to self and others. Furthermore, exploration and dialogue are key components in discovering one's self and we cannot expect students to engage in such activities without structure and guidance. The relevance of this approach is based on the idea that career is more than fitting one's personality with environment and job tasks—we must explore who we are, what our purpose is, determine what we find meaningful, and understand our strengths and skills in order to truly develop a satisfying career.

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