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Receive in order to give: Eastern cultural values and their relevance to contemporary career counselling contexts

Gideon Arulmani

Introduction

A young Indian girl, living in Australia was brought to see me when she was on vacation in India. I was told I was the 'last resort' since the girl was blindly rebelling against all advice. Perched irritably on the edge of her chair she said to me: "I am so confused...my career counsellor in Melbourne told me I would do well in the humanities. I was happy! Because I love history. But my dad... he was shocked. He said the career counsellor was *pagal* (mad)! He wants me to be an engineer. My mum... She wants me to be a doctor (she wanted to be one but couldn't). And now... my grandparents are saying Australia has spoiled me. Made me too western. Girls are supposed to study, get a degree, marry and have children you see. And now I've been brought to you. What are *you* going to say? To whom am I to listen? You're all driving me nuts."

I begin with this quotation to highlight two related themes that have implications for career counselling today: that counselling contexts are becoming increasingly multicultural and that numerous, often contradictory, social and cultural mediated forces influence the career decision making process. The careers advice this young woman received from her Australian counsellor was perhaps perfectly acceptable in the Australian context. However within her family, as with most Indian families, studying the humanities is believed to be an indication that one failed to get into the more prestigious science oriented courses. The interplay between gender and career choice is also very clear in her statement. At a deeper level, the influence of her parents' desires and the expectations of her community, accentuate her confusion. Cultures prepare individuals to engage with life in different ways. This article discusses the necessity of developing a sharper sensitivity to the notion of cultural preparedness in order to sharpen the relevance and effectiveness of a career counselling service.

Customary maybe contrary

Contradictory situations such as the one reported above, with several factors influencing the process of

decision making, are becoming more and more common. Most methods of guidance and counselling emerged in an environment wherein the counsellor and counselee belonged to a similar cultural background. Hence conditions could be created for a particular approach to counselling that were necessary and sufficient for that context. The crucial point to consider is that the same conditions may be neither necessary nor sufficient for a people from a different cultural heritage. An individualistically oriented counselling paradigm that places the individual and his or her desires at centre stage for example, may not be effective with a collectivistic client group whose culture has prepared them to lay a strong value on others' opinions and their group's wellbeing. Geographic borders are more porous today than ever before and it is common that counsellor and counselee come from differing cultural backgrounds, each motivated and inspired by their own beliefs and inclinations toward work and career. Indeed what is customary in one context may be experienced as contrary in another context. Studies that have examined the impact and outcome of educational initiatives have found that interventions that are based on worldviews that are dissimilar to the worldview of the group that the intervention is intended to serve, have poor community participation which affects sustainability and programme effectiveness (Reese and Vera, 2007). The applicability of an intervention is often poor when 'universal' principles are applied without considering the ways in which they need to be adapted to the 'particular' characteristics of a specific setting (Griffin and Miller, 2007). Furthermore, the need for career guidance is rapidly strengthening in non-Western contexts (Arulmani, 2010). At the same time the fact remains that the developing world has been poorly represented in the international literature. The need for models and methods of guidance and counselling that are relevant to the culture and economies of these countries is urgent. This calls for a broadening of paradigms in counselling which traditionally have had their origins in a Western epistemology. Over the years, the forces of colonisation and globalisation have interfered with prevailing ways of life and discredited the precepts of local cultures. As a result, age old practices, skills and knowledge bases are discarded in today's circumstances as being irrational and unreasonable (Bissel, 2010). Given below are two illustrations.

Macaulay's Minute – 1835

The following is drawn from Young (1935) and Thirumalai's (2002) description of the creation of the English Education Act, a legislative Act of the Council of India passed in 1835. Thomas Babington Macaulay (Lord Macaulay) arrived in India as a member of the Supreme Council of India. His sojourn lasted barely four years, but his impact on the educational philosophy of India and thereby orientations to career preparation was so profound that its effects are felt even today. He was staunchly patriotic and very soon developed intense dislike for Indian culture, languages, arts, sciences, and theology. He was however, entirely well intentioned and says '...it will be the proudest day in English history, to have found a great people sunk in the lowest depths of slavery and superstition, to have so ruled them as to have made them desirous and capable of all the privileges of citizens, would indeed be a title to glory all our own' (Young, 1935:125). His famous minute presented to the Governor General says, '...the dialects commonly spoken among the natives of this part of India, contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are...so poor and rude that, the intellectual improvement of those classes of the people who have the means of pursuing higher studies can at present be effected only by means of some language, not vernacular amongst them' (Young, 1935: 203). His comment on a literature upheld by a way of life that is thousands of years old was, '...I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works...I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.' In effect, well intentioned though he was, Macaulay portrayed the method and language of education for which Indians were culturally prepared as being less valuable. These views were accepted and transformed into policy when Governor General William Bentinck's stated: 'I give my entire concurrence to the sentiments expressed in this Minute' (Young, 1935: 403). With this, indigenous forms of education and ancient Indian languages were placed, at best, at a lower level of priority.

Sithaladevi: The goddess of Small Pox

My second illustration draws upon Dharampal's (1971), documentation of the loss of indigenous technologies, methods, devices and procedures that were practised in India with great effectiveness for hundreds of years.

The practice of inoculation against small pox was known in India as early as A.D.1800. In Bengal (Eastern India) inoculation was performed by a particular sect of Brahmins, delegated annually for this service. Dividing themselves into small parties of three or four each, they planned their travelling circuits so as to arrive at their respective destinations some weeks before the usual return of the disease. In addition, small pox was linked to a special goddess: Sitala. She was portrayed with a terrifying visage, oozing fulminating pustules, rotting flesh and carrying a disfigured face, in the late stages of infection. The belief was actively promoted that the evidence of sitalika (pustules) was evidence of being 'possessed' by the terrible Sitala. The treatment prescribed is fascinating. A Brahmin, possessed of faith, would recite the hymn of Sitala Devi in the presence of the sitalika (pustules); while chanting he would select a spot on the outside of the arm, rub it vigorously with a dry cloth for 8 to 10 minutes, make 15 to 16 minute incisions with a steel tool sterilised in a sacred fire, place a small wad of cotton saturated with matter from the pustules of the preceding year, moistened with Ganga (holy) water, on the wound and ensure it remained in contact with the wound for several hours. This was the disease management method prescribed nearly 200 years ago! Remarkably comparable to modern forms of inoculation! Except that, all through the procedure the inoculator continuously recited the worship of the Small Pox Goddess. This practice represents the blending of religion with daily life; naturalistic (scientific) facts were presented within the garb of religion. Religious interpretations placed upon this disease did not exclude naturalistic comprehension. Reverence of Sitala did not require people to reject such scientific facts. In fact it facilitated a complete and whole-hearted acceptance of the entire procedure. This is how this group was culturally prepared to combat this virulent disease. British rule in India also led to the control of Indian life and society. Shocked by such 'barbaric practices', this form of treatment was banned. People were dissuaded from resorting to it. Gradually, this time honoured, highly successful, community based medical practice crumbled and decayed. This traditional, culturally sanctioned form of inoculation was replaced by other Western methods. Of course these methods were as effective. But they were unfamiliar to the people, who were suspicious and did not comply unless forced. As a result, for the first time in centuries, people were left unprotected against small pox. Not surprisingly thereafter, Bengal, for the first time, experienced multiple small pox epidemics of devastating proportions.

History is replete with such examples, not only from India, but from around the world. It is not my purpose in citing these examples, to denigrate the efforts of those who ruled India. There is no doubt at all, that Lord Macaulay and British doctors did want British subjects in India to gain from Britain's offerings. It is what lies behind that good intention that I draw to the reader's attention: the lack of sensitivity to methods, systems and culturally embedded ways of living, fuelled, dare I say, by a misplaced conviction in the superiority of one's own methods and ideas. These examples are nearly two centuries old. Yet, the underlying principle is relevant to this day. Counsellors today are highly likely to meet clients who are from entirely different persuasions. Effectiveness of outcomes is not achieved merely by 'respecting' others' points of view. It rests also upon the willingness to take a giant step further forward to facilitate a reciprocity of learning between the counsellor and the counselee. It is here perhaps, the notion of cultural preparedness could have relevance to planning and developing career counselling programmes that have a strong link with the client's felt needs.

The cultural preparedness approach

A culture prepares its members to engage with life in a particular manner. The learning that occurs between

an individual and his or her culture is not only the result of interactions with present members of that culture. It is drawn from a deep repository of experience that has accumulated and grown over the ages. Each of us has been immersed in a conglomerate of attitudes, opinions, convictions, and notions that coalesce and shape our engagement with life. Prevailing cultural practices tend to create an environment of attitudes and beliefs which we have referred to as social cognitive environments (Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani, 2004). They could be in relation to marriage, childrearing, sexuality, food habits, gender relations, or any other aspect of a given group's engagement with its surroundings. It is crucial to note that the nature of this engagement could vary from one group to another. The cultural preparedness approach points out that career development occurs under the influence of a wide range of factors. Family and parents, social practices, religious persuasion, economic climate, political orientations, all come together to create a certain environment within which attitudes and opinions are formed about work, occupation and career. The effectiveness of an intervention could be higher when the ideas and concepts that lie behind an intervention cohere with the history, values and beliefs of a particular community.

Indian philosophy and career development

Ancient Indian culture described constructs that have direct relevance to work, occupation and career. I will now describe a few of these practices to illustrate the notion of cultural preparedness.

Religion and spirituality:

Sculpture, painting, poetry, architecture, dance – almost all aspect of Indian art and literature have spirituality as their central theme. Day to day life too is coloured by religion, as are orientations to work and career. Inextricably woven into the Indian way of life the sacred is seen in the secular. Hence it is not unusual for a person who has his or her roots in this culture to first turn to culturally-endorsed representatives of religion and spirituality before turning to a secular counsellor for advice and guidance. Furthermore, individuals from this background are used to being directed and being 'given' the answers to their questions. In a career counselling interaction, a family would expect to be 'told' which career would suit their child the best. Being directive and advice-oriented would not be considered inappropriate. It would in fact be expected.

Dharma: The code of responsibility:

Dharma which means 'right living' is a primary value which describes an engagement with life that is always reciprocally supportive, sustaining rather than exploitative, giving and at the same time receiving. This worldview espouses a quality of human interactions that is characterised both by separateness as well as interdependence. Work therefore is understood as a duty and a contribution.

Samsara and karma:

Samsara is a philosophic construct that describes an individual's existence as spanning lifetimes, beginning, developing, ending, and beginning once again. *Karma Yoga* is a doctrine that qualifies the notion of samsara. At the heart of this principle is the exhortation that the person must be engaged with life in totality but without attachment and selfishness. Samsara and karma describe existence and development to be cyclical rather than linear. Development is not conceived as unidirectional, progressing from a start to a terminal point. Instead, development is seen as a constantly regenerating cycle that builds upon earlier development (Arulmani, 2011). It is a superficial interpretation that leads to an understanding of karma and samsara as being fatalistic and deterministic. In effect, karma and samsara urge action and uphold the self-mediation

of circumstances. 'Effort' is celebrated and the individual is encouraged to shape the future through actions executed thoughtfully and wilfully in the present (Arulmani, 2011).

Ashramas:

The ancient Indian ashrama system describes life's purpose to play out in stages. Materialism is encouraged during the early stages of one's life. Personal gain and the creation of wealth through energetic engagement with work is required during these stages. Interestingly, the latter stages of life are described differently. One is not expected to retire and stop working. Instead, vigorous engagement with work continues. But the object of work is different. As one matures the purpose of one's work is to serve the community without motivations of personal gain. Indian approaches, therefore, are not merely 'other-worldly'. Nor do they describe work as drudgery. They encourage energetic engagement with the world of work and with maturity the purpose of work gradually transforms into an act of service to others.

An important point that emerges from the foregoing discussion is that work and occupation are understood to be an integral aspect of one's life. These principles are believed to have divine origins and guide day-to-day living. An individual who is a part of this culture has been prepared to view work as an extension of one's life. However, for the reasons described at the beginning of this writing, these values have been eroded and the purpose and meaning of work and career have been obscured. Over the recent past, there has been increasing interest in incorporating indigenous constructs and concepts into counselling and reports indicate that such approaches have highly positive outcomes (e.g., Kakar, 2003). Our field experience also has demonstrated that career guidance interventions are more sustainable when they fit in with culturally endorsed images and beliefs about career development (e.g., Arulmani and Abdulla, 2007). With a view to developing an approach to career guidance that is culture-resonant and at the same time relevant to the present-day context, we interpreted established Indian cultural principles into a career guidance programme. As an illustration of applying the cultural preparedness framework, the final section of this paper describes the Jiva approach to guidance and counselling which is based upon the cultural constructs described above.

The *Jiva* Approach to guidance and counselling

As discussed above, the original Indian understanding weaves life and work closely together. Hence our approach was named 'Jiva', which means 'life' in almost all Indian languages. The Jiva method of guidance and counselling is based on a set of principles the salient features of which are described below.

Principle 1. Career as a Spiral: A Nonlinear Approach to Career Development

This Jiva principle draws upon the cultural construct of samsara which symbolises the circularity of life. Common experience tells us that a career hardly ever develops in a linear and sequential manner, moving smoothly from one success to another. In reality, new possibilities open, paths diverge and expectations may need modification. Using the image of the spiral, Jiva describes the individual's engagement with work as a continuous elaboration and construction, characterised by adaptation, discovery and renewal (Arulmani, 2011). Young people participating in the Jiva programme learn that progress may not always point in the 'forward' direction. In fact healthy development may require one to return to earlier learnings, let go of previous positions and begin afresh.

Principle 2. Dispassionate Decision-Making: Assess Before You Accept

Economic development today is such that jobs migrate from one labour market to another, leading to the unprecedented materialization of new occupational prospects in some economies. In such contexts career choosers rush to grasp opportunities, making decisions based upon a 'high salary' rather than personal fulfilment. With the passage of time, as wage bills increase, jobs migrate once again to locations where labour is cheaper. The commitment to a job with a high salary turns out to be merely a chimera. Jiva uses the karmic concept of *nishkama* which exhorts the individual to practice dispassion in the face of emotional arousal. The objective of career guidance would be to help individuals exercise restraint and shape the future through actions executed thoughtfully and wilfully in the present. Effective career guidance therefore would include helping the individual weigh up advantages and disadvantages and *then* accept or more importantly learn to say no to what merely appears to be a 'good' opportunity.

Principle 3. Sensitivity to the 'Other': Practicing a Sustainable Career

Environmental degradation is an issue that is related to the manner in which we practice our careers. Inclusion of ideas into career guidance, related to practicing sustainable careers is urgently required. Sensitivity to the 'other' is a deeply cherished Indian custom that emerges from the concepts of dharma and ashrama. Jiva draws upon this ancient attitude to life and points the career chooser to ponder over the consequences of his/her engagement with work. The inclusion of the notion of dharma highlights a career guidance principle wherein the pursuit of career goals would buttress rather than degrade the environment in which the career is practiced.

Principle 4. The Changing and the Unchanged: Coping with Unpredictability

The last decade's dramatic changes in the world of work and the labour market have brought a vital fact to the fore: today's career chooser must develop the skills to deal with uncertainty and unpredictability. Going back to the concept of Dharma, we see a description of the cosmos as a paradox wherein change and permanence coexist. Indian philosophy points out that while the form may change, the core remains the same. This Jiva principle focuses on helping the career chooser find the balance between aspects of self that change and aspects that are comparatively more firm and constant. External influences for example are likely to change personal interests. On the other hand aptitudes are relatively more stable. Jiva points out that while jobs are tied to the ups and downs of labour market cycles, a career, composed as it is of a family of jobs, is more likely to remain in demand.

The Jiva Logo which appears at the beginning of this article, has been created with the intention of presenting these principles in graphic form. Principle 1 is reflected in the spiral, the tick mark represents Principle 2, the colours of the logo, green and blue, tie in with Principle 3 and the unfinished circle demonstrates Principle 4.

Conclusion

I return to the concept of the ashrama to draw this writing to a close. While the ashrama system articulates the roles and duties of the individual, it also underlines the consideration to be focused upon the individual by the larger community. It is within this ongoing process of 'giving' and 'receiving' that a career has its being. This principle also has relevance to the career guidance professional. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, the settings in which counselling must be delivered are becoming increasingly multicultural. The ideas,

values and motivations of counsellor and client might vary quite dramatically. The effectiveness of a counselling interaction could be much enhanced if the counsellor creates an environment wherein the interaction is a teaching-learning experience both for the client *and* for the counsellor. At the deepest level, this is an attitude. An attitude that allows the counsellor to also be a learner. An attitude that allows the counsellor to receive in order to give.

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