counseling issues for adult women in career transition

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This article addresses current psychosocial issues facing women in career transition and the implications of those issues for career counselors. Specifically, psychosocial developmental trajectories, the roles of family and relationships, the importance of underlying physical and mental health issues, and sociocultural and contextual stressors are relevant for women in the midst of career change. The author discusses how career counselors can prepare for this complexity and addresses clients’ current economic and social milieus. A checklist is provided to aid the career counselor in addressing the multiple issues that a new client brings to the 1st counseling encounter.

Career counselors currently face a uniquely challenged clientele. The economic landscape for middle-aged adults is bleak and more precarious than recent generations have experienced. Perhaps most urgently, the global recession has created jobless rates within the United States unequalled since the recession in the 1970s; even more troubling is that sustained unemployment is at its highest level in the past 60 years (Appelbaum, 2011). Those who are employed may face underemployment or be in a stopgap job, or have a spouse or partner facing job loss or reduction in job quality. U.S. underemployment is also concentrated in low-income households (Sum & Khatriwada, 2010), further threatening vulnerable families. Finally, the diminution of retirement plans and the perceived frailty of Social Security, the tax-based retirement plan in the United States, create new economic pressures on families.

Demographic trends have also changed the normative duration of one’s career. Traditional career pathways, job security, and foreseeable career development and trajectories are no longer the norm (Dwyers, Ward, Maxwell, & Eaton-Comerford, 2003; Maglio, Butterfield, & Borgen, 2005). The once-familiar paradigm of job security, including job longevity, benefits, and in-house career development pathways, is being replaced by a new paradigm that includes parallel career trajectories, winding career pathways, less benefits, and low job security (Maglio et al., 2005).

Within this shift in the culture and climate of work, women face specific challenges and opportunities as they manage their careers. The multiple personal and public roles—women value, gender-based barriers, and internal and external values about work create important permutations in the career counseling landscape (Hackett, 1997), and many theorists and practitioners have called on career counselors to do

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Journal of Employment Counseling • June 2012 • Volume 49

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more in addressing career transition given the current climate (Chae, 2002; Downs et al., 2008; Hackett, 1997). How career counselors can meaningfully respond to women in career transition is the essence of this article, with a focus on the United States. Specifically, maintaining a psychosocial development perspective, understanding the roles of family and relationships, addressing physical and mental health issues, and remaining aware of contextual stressors are discussed. A checklist is also provided to aid the career counselor in addressing the multiple issues that a new client brings to the first counseling encounter (see Table 1).

MAINTAINING A PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

One approach to midlife career transitions is to understand the need for transition and the barriers to succeeding at this transition from a developmental perspective. The standard in the life-span approach to career development has been Super’s life-span theory, which views career development as a process of growth (14–15 years), exploration (14–24 years), establishment (25–44 years), maintenance (45–65 years), and disengagement (65 years and older; Hackett, 1997; Super, 1980). This model does not necessarily accommodate career transitions or how the individual manages career transitions over the life cycle of work. Establishment and maintenance are not dynamic categories; they do not embrace career exploration or retraining for a new career trajectory. The model does not reflect women’s career trajectories in particular, because elements particularly germane to working women, including periods of leave and unemployment (planned and unplanned), delayed education, and opting out of traditional career pathways of corporate employment, a pattern that women have pioneered in recent history (see Sullivan & Mainiero, 2000), are not developed.

However, women’s developmental life stages are likely to be highly relevant in counseling sessions for career transitions, even in the face of undesired and unexpected job loss and transition. Sullivan and Mainiero (2003) used an Eriksenian developmental model of career growth, postulating that different career needs exist at different life stages. In their Kaleidoscope Career Model, Sullivan and Mainiero identified three career development qualities for women in the paid workforce, each manifesting at specific developmental stages—early, mid, and late. Challenge with one’s work is more important at early stages of career, whereas work-life balance, regardless of chronological age, is prioritized at

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Note. The timing of the discussions is suggested only.
midlife, when women value the needs of relationships and family (Cabrera, 2007; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2003). Authenticity at the latter stages of one's career is highlighted by a refocusing on what feels right to oneself, rather than balancing the needs of family and relationships, and finding meaning and fulfillment in one's work (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2003). The pull to be generative, the Eriksonian concept of the need to give back to society at the latter stages of life, may underlie career transition for older women, especially for individuals whose children have become more independent and/or for those whose responsibility for elders has lessened.

Research has also demonstrated that, for a sample of career changers, generative characteristics—such as building relationships and finding personal meaning within work contexts—led to greater emotional well-being compared with those who tended to focus on self-growth or self-actualization (Bauer & McAdams, 2004). However, the study design did not permit examination of whether those with greater well-being overall are more likely to embody generative characteristics in general.

Erikson's (1950/1993) postulation of epigenesis within his life-span developmental framework is also relevant for career counselors. The idea behind epigenesis is that the psychological resolution of identity crisis of each developmental stage depends in part on the successful traversing of prior stages. Although behaviors within each developmental stage fall on a continuum of most adaptive to least adaptive, counselors may encounter developmental issues in their clients. Persons who find themselves increasingly isolated or self-preoccupied may be demonstrating unresolved developmental tasks. Clients with limited flexibility in dealing with changes in the workplace and low cognitive adaptability may be reflecting a developmental challenge (Super & Knasel, 1981).

The existential aspect of job loss and temporary joblessness additionally creates daunting psychological challenges for the individual. When career transitions follow or anticipate joblessness, existential concerns may arise because job loss is related to one's sense of identity, how one makes meaning out of one's life, and how one structures one's time (Maglio et al., 2005). The client is now responsible for her time and her identity, and she must learn how to manage this freedom. According to the Kaleidoscope Career Model, this is likely to be more salient for women in the early stage of their careers, because the model postulates that job-related challenges and career development are priorities at this stage. When a client is navigating new developmental challenges as well as meeting the psychic demands of maintaining a coherent identity during joblessness, this time of transition can be profoundly destabilizing.

COUNSELING IMPLICATIONS OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Career counselors should keep existential questions in mind with a client who is experiencing job loss. Questions such as "How are you coping with aloneness?" "Is there an identity loss?" and "How are you managing your freedom?" create a safe space for the client to explore how she is experiencing her life during a destabilizing time of career transition (Maglio et al., 2005). For clients who request more concrete guidance, directing conversations on reevaluating the meaning of unemployment, discussing accomplishments, helping them implement time management techniques,
and offering suggestions on how to maintain generativity while unemployed will help them through an identity crisis (Garrett-Peters, 2000).

Hamaecke (1990) advised career counselors to pay attention to certain behaviors or attitudes (e.g., fearfulness, self-centeredness) that may indicate underlying developmental issues. The counselor can then address ego or identity development through conversations about earlier relationship ruptures or losses; healing or resolving these issues may help the client embrace and fulfill her capacity for generativity.

The core of Super's (1953) concept of career adaptability is the interaction between the individual and his or her environment. Practical implications include setting realistic goals with clients and assessing their knowledge of work culture and their computer and Internet skills, skills required in the current job market but perhaps a challenge for women returning to employment. To assist adults in becoming more adaptable in their career development, counselors can teach planning strategies, foster exploration of interests and aptitudes, give homework using computer-based search skills, and cultivate their clients' decision-making skills (Super & Kasl, 1981). Other interventions include experimenting with career recycling, either via retraining or considering earlier options, and the simultaneous pursuit of different skills and career options (Duyts et al., 2003).

Evidence from successful career transitions also suggests that the client should be encouraged to consider the future and be pluralistic and imaginative about her career even when things are going well (Ehberwein, Kriehs, Uyen, & Prosser, 2001). Counseling on realistic expectations with a job search, including the time it may take, the daily effort, and preparing for rejections, is also useful (Ehberwein et al., 2001). In a study of individuals who negotiated job transition after layoffs, Ehberwein et al. (2001) found that those who took control of the layoff process, by taking early severance, for example, or by starting a job search early when the signs of layoffs were evident, cope better and found meaningful employment sooner compared with those who did not.

Helping clients cope with uncertainty, in part by fostering cognitive flexibility and through exercises designed to think experimentally and proactively about one's career, is critical. Examples of open-ended questions that direct the client in positive, future-oriented thinking include "What can I give to others?" "What skills would I like to take include . . . ," and "I enjoy being productive and creative doing . . .." (Hamaecke, 1990, p. 67). Furthermore, re framing uncertainty as a new experience and an opportunity for growth can help overcome anxiety and resistance to change. If the client has had a positive experience with change or uncertainty, asking her to remember that time can be helpful (Pelsma & Arnett, 2002).

Facilitating resilience and risk taking is more challenging than providing a client with certain tools to negotiate a career transition. Taking risks is especially challenging after experiencing a setback or some loss to self-esteem, such as job loss or receiving an unfavorable work review. The counselor can explore transferable skills, such as encouraging the client to write down times from her past when she both was successful and enjoyed herself (Duyts et al., 2003). Other exercises may include encouraging the client to remember a time when she accomplished a certain goal and to probe what enabled that success. For example, the counselor may wish to explore how the client was thinking and what other things she was doing at that time (Pelsma & Arnett,
2002). If the client has had few successes and change is overwhelming, more creative approaches (such as visualization, drawing pictures, and creating “what if” scenarios) can help the client explore change and risks in a safe manner.

From a developmental context, it is not surprising that women may face mental health issues upon returning to work, including depression, anxiety, and adjustment disorders. Symptoms may reem as the counselor works with the client on earlier developmental problems (e.g., lack of trust and feelings of shame and inadequacy), but referrals for joint pharmacotherapy and/or psychotherapy should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

**FAMILY AND RELATIONSHIP ISSUES**

Theorists Gilligan (1982) and Josselson (1983) postulated that women negotiate and consolidate career identities through reciprocal relationships. This feminist relational perspective considers not just key relationships in a woman’s life but also relatedness to self, others, and the wider community (Motulsky, 2010). Women who are not partnered, nonetheless, often maintain a relationship focus by caring for elders, being engaged with young family members, such as nephews and nieces; or looking for a life partner (Sullivan & Mannino, 2003). Although the Kaleidoscope Career Model postulates that women tend to highly value their key relationships at midlife, thus influencing career choice, this feminist perspective describes how women construct their work identities through interrelatedness. Work identity and career choices are mediated by the quality of relationships.

Values and identity that center on family may propel a career transition. Women may choose to leave the paid workforce or opt out of high-pressure careers to care for their children. Women providing informal care to aged parents may also be forced to transition to a job that allows greater flexibility but also represents lost wages (Bolin, Lindgren, & Lundborg, 2003), or she may need to quit the workforce altogether. Furthermore, women who opt out of the formal workforce face powerlessness, disrespect, and economic vulnerability, reinforcing that the social benefits of power, respect, and wealth can come only from entering the male domain of work (Schultheiss, 2009). Thus, gender inequality is doubly maintained; less wealth and power within the workplace and devaluation of work in the home.

A career change by necessity affects the entire family system (Farber, 1996), placing the family in “dis-equilibrium” (O’Neil, Fishman, & Kinsella-Shaw, 1985, p. 701). In addition to changes in income, a new job may include commute or travel, placing new strains on the family (O’Neil et al., 1985). Furthermore, the client’s family of origin may have specific values about career choice, work, and motherhood (Motulsky, 2010). This may be particularly salient for women from working-class backgrounds where achieving professional goals or more education is perceived as “other” or even as threatening.

**COUNSELING IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY AND RELATIONSHIP ISSUES**

For women pulled by both familial needs and career aspirations, career workshops offer effective psychoeducational activities and can help validate and normalize these
issues, while helping develop practical approaches (Lucas, Skokowski, & Aners, 2000), especially when used conjunctively with support groups, which have been found effective for women transitioning careers (Desser et al., 2001).

The role of spouse and values about work and family can be explored with open-ended questions about work and motherhood via one-on-one career counseling. For women choosing to opt out and stay at home to rear children, the counselor can challenge the social norm of devaluing unpaid work by reframing the career-to-home transition as a new career with its own skills, expertise, and goals (Schultheiss, 2009).

Counseling can also provide a safe environment for experimenting with career and role decisions through role playing, visualization, nine lives exercises, and other structured explorations (Lucas et al., 2000). Cognitively oriented counselors can draw on qualitative research on cognitive strategies used by women who successfully navigated a career transition. For example, new mothers who actively discussed and considered gender role stereotypes, corporate policies, and expectations of partner relationships were able to cope with the multiple demands of career reentry (Miller, 1996). Counselors can implement similar strategies by engaging with the client's cognitive schemas about work and motherhood, exploring her family of origin's values, and discussing society's values and how her experiences contrast or resemble those of her peers. These conversations help the client make explicit her values regarding work and parenting while identifying areas of dissonance.

**PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES**

Clients may come for career counseling with previously undiagnosed mood disorders or personality disorders. Depression, for example, not only can affect an employee's absenteeism but reduces the employee's ability to complete work activities as well (Kerner et al., 2010). An untreated mental health issue will have repercussions for the client's ability to implement any interventions developed with a counselor, to be adaptive, and to experience success in the new job setting. Furthermore, joblessness itself is a risk factor for mental health issues. Long-term and medium-term unemployment has been found to be associated with psychiatric hospital admissions (Eriksson, Agerbo, Mortensen, & Westergaard-Nielsen, 2010) in Europe, and duration of joblessness in the United States is associated with an increased risk for suicide (Glassen & Dunn, 2012). Following a job loss, aside from a clinical diagnosis, the client may be experiencing a sense of betrayal, low self-esteem, self-doubt, anger, and self-recrimination, all within the career counseling context.

Women may also present with issues related to aging or menopause, with a lack of energy, changes in sleep patterns, physical discomforts, and reductions in cognitive processing speed. There may be other physical considerations, such as a chronic medical condition, which necessitate both continuity of health insurance and out-of-pocket costs for medical expenses. Morris, Shoffner, and Newsome (2009) argued that most career counselors will encounter women with a history of intimate partner violence. The psychological wounds from intimate partner violence have repercussions in the client's perceived self-efficacy, beliefs in positive outcomes for career
development, and beliefs in her self-sufficiency, all of which will influence the relationship with the career counselor and counseling outcomes (Morris et al., 2009).

COUNSELING IMPLICATIONS OF PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

The practice of implementing routine mood and abuse screens for all new clients has several benefits. First, clients are not caught off guard if a screen is introduced after the counseling relationship has already been established. Second, counselors do not have to rely on their clinical intuition by deciding who should and should not receive these screens. Counselors should also proactively assess underlying personality factors that can predict adaptability and mood (Heppner, Fuller, & Mulvihill, 1998), especially if there is a pattern of conflict or breaks within the workplace or in personal relationships. For all mental health issues, referral for conjoint psychotherapy and/or pharmacotherapy may be indicated. Women with a history of intimate partner violence are likely to benefit from counselors who can translate their life experiences into job skills and from developing a more expansive and positive expectation for their future, a necessary component to effective career counseling (Morris et al., 2009). Asking about any health concerns is appropriate; this conversation may act as a prompt for a woman to see a medical health professional or may reorient the career counseling goals to include quality health insurance.

CONTEXTUAL STRESSORS AND CONSTRAINTS

Although theories of career transition offer important intrapersonal and developmental insights, the career counselor must maintain a respectful awareness of the real-life stressors and constraints each client faces. Given economic hardship, the career transition becomes urgent and may limit short-term options for the client. In the current recession recovery, the unemployment rate remains high, and the average time to find employment increases (Weiss & Gardner, 2010). Economic stressors include job loss, economic downturns, and economic insecurity. The unemployment rate continues to fall (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Female-headed households have the highest unemployment rate of all American households (Weiss & Gardner, 2010), placing these women and children at risk for eviction, school disruption, homelessness, and food insecurity. Racial and ethnic minority women who are single heads of families have the lowest net worth of any American demographic group (Weiss & Gardner, 2010). Because these women are overrepresented among single heads of households, unemployment creates particularly acute circumstances.

Even without economic urgency, a client may face difficult decisions concerning an ideal job that would not financially support her family (Elberwein et al., 2004). The middle-class family that once could afford soccer team fees and occasional dinners out may have to adjust to very different family traditions and rhythms. Financial security offers psychological buffers that, when absent, create real psychological and physical vulnerability in clients. A study conducted by Elberwein et al. (2004) concluded that the client's financial situation was the most fundamental factor in how adaptively he or she managed a career transition. Another study of longitudinal data...
on female college graduates found that the most important factor related to career momentum (i.e., an individual’s subjective feelings of success and investment in his or her career) was their job status (Roberts & Friend, 1993).

Unfortunately, gender biases still exist in terms of job choice and job position or title; for example, social biases against women in leadership positions are still common (Chae, 2002), and it is contended that the effect is more profound among minority women (Combs, 2003). As of 2009, the most recent year for which data are available, European American women in the United States earned approximately 80% of what was earned by European American men; African American women earned 80.6%, and Latinas earned 80.60 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). It should be noted that Asian American men and women are the highest median earners in the United States. Also of note is that research has shown that women perceive more barriers to being hired for competitive jobs and that women still experience salary cuts when they take time off from work to have children and then reenter the workforce (Chae, 2002). Middle-aged and older women are likely to face age discrimination as well, with one study showing that younger job candidates were 10% more likely to receive a job interview compared with older job candidates (Larkey, 2003).

Additionally, minority women continue to face racial and ethnic discrimination (Hackett, 1997). Evidence shows that, in the United States, although both European American and African American women experience disproportionate hiring compared with European American men, African American women are promoted at lower rates than European American women (Ortiz & Roseigno, 2009).

COUNSELING IMPLICATIONS OF CONTEXTUAL STRESSORS

The counselor needs to first assess the client’s financial stability. As with a routine mood screen, standard questions about the family’s economy asked at the initial visit again remove any burden from the counselor of relying on his or her personal judgment, which could allow possible biases to creep into the counseling encounter. In the presence of serious financial constraints, the counselor should consider referring for debt counseling, tenancy rights, mortgage leniency programs, and shelters and should counsel on employee benefit programs and unemployment benefits. If the client is preparing for a transition and is facing a layoff, the counselor can offer guidance on severance packages and role-play with the client to facilitate productive negotiations. Through publications, activism, and organizational counseling, career counselors can help implement proemployee layoff practices and facilitate respectful and inclusive communication between employees and management (Amundson, Borgen, Jordan, & Erlebach, 2004).

Counselors can also help clients adjust to a stopgap job by framing it as an intermediate step on the path to a more fulfilling or remunerative position (Eberlein et al., 2004). Workshops for individuals facing layoffs can also provide emotional validation for clients (Amundson et al., 2004). In the case where a client feels she cannot pursue her dream job because of its pay, the counselor can explore, with the client, how to meaningfully incorporate the essence of that work in other aspects of her life and how to work toward a greater representation of those skills and activities in her paid work.
The role of class and status should not be underemphasized in career counseling women in transition. Drawing on the Roberts and Friend (1993) study of career momentum, a counselor must be mindful that a lack of success or motivation with career issues may reflect the woman's job status. Encouraging her to increase that status, by gaining new skills, furthering her education, or addressing self-esteem issues that have prevented her ambitions, is a valid intervention. Counseling on accepting a temporary income reduction and adapting to a new standard of living may also be indicated.

Addressing glass ceiling effects first requires counselors to be aware of any gender biases they may hold regarding types of professions that are suitable and women in leadership (Chae, 2002). Furthermore, countertransference problems may arise if the counselor has unresolved issues concerning ambition, risk taking, or being in leadership positions. The counselor can role-play with the client on ways to use this agency and self-efficacy in public, formal relationships (Chae, 2002). Mentoring is also seen as a critical element to career success; in some cases, a career counselor can also serve as a mentor for the client (Chae, 2002). Finally, the counselor should be a change agent, a voice for changing organizations and social systems that maintain glass ceilings (Hansen, 2003) or sticky floors.

Counselors must remain sensitive to the multiple diversities they encounter with their clients. Female veterans, women of diverse ethnicities, lesbians and transgender women, and women from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds and from different countries have unique cultural experiences that influence views on the meaning of work, how job searches are conducted, and the kinds of work that are acceptable. Counselors who cultivate self-awareness of biases or discomfort with special populations and address these discomforts, either through change in one's attitudes or by referring to another counselor as needed, will best serve their clients. Counselors should initiate dialogues with the client regarding her diversity, demonstrating to the client that she is welcome and understood. The counselor can then challenge the client with questions on her experience of discrimination and opportunity; how she has experienced her identity in the workplace, in her job searches, and with her social networks; and how her culture and orientation affect her work choices.

Finally, advocating for women in the workplace regarding gender-based firing, lack of promotion opportunities, and hiring discrimination (by any social or physical status) is also the counselor's concern. This can be done privately, through letters or conversations, or publicly, through testimonies, marches, research and publications, signing petitions, and so on, depending on the counselor's personal comfort level. Without advocacy and without addressing contextual barriers to women's work-life success, career counseling for women seeking assistance after being laid off, fired, or not promoted can, at worst, be accused of maintaining the status quo.

CONCLUSION

Clients coming to career counseling are likely to have complex concerns and aspirations. The work of the career counselor has evolved far beyond administering skill inventories. The depth of a career counselor's skills, although perhaps underrecognized, is required to fully meet the needs of today's clients. For example, although at
the surface a person may present with a straightforward career question, there may be deeper issues, and the counselor's work may need to draw on a developmental context. Unpredictability, in the world of work, means individualized interventions (Duns et al., 2003; Wise & Willward, 2005); while the counselor evaluates the client's vocational-based skills, interests, and proclivities, other psychosocial issues may arise. These issues may be sociocontextual, leaving the client with a sense of powerlessness, anger, and frustration. Clients may also express interpersonal problems, mood disorders, and unresolved psychic conflicts. In serving women facing career transitions, career counselors prepared for this complexity and who are aware of the current economic and social milieu will help career counseling continue as a resoundingly relevant profession.

REFERENCES


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