



“What Am I to do?” On Career Counsellor’s Dilemmas

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Counselors' dilemmas include doubts or conflicts about what to say or do when all of the possible alternatives are equally unsatisfactory (Scaturro & McPeak, 1998).

The experience of dilemma is transtheoretical because it occurs in different modalities of counseling or psychotherapy, regardless the theoretical orientation of the counselor or therapist (Scaturro, 2005).



Studies drawn mostly from the field of psychotherapy, reveal that each treatment approach presents core dilemmas related to critical dimensions of its practices.

Despite the importance of counselors' and psychotherapists' dilemmas for reflection on counseling and psychotherapy process and psychologists' training, very little is known regarding the dilemmas that counselors face in career counseling.



Dilemmas involving Computer-Assisted Career Counseling (CACC), likely to occur in face-to-face career counseling (Gati, 1994):

- 1) Image of Accuracy - the counselor's challenge is how to avoid influence from his/her stereotypes on the selection and transmission of career information;
- 2) Providing Just the Relevant Information - the counselor struggles to provide relevant information without overloading the client;
- 3) Eliciting Aspirations while Encouraging Compromise - the challenge is to achieve a balance between facilitating the client's expression of aspirations and helping with the process of compromising career plans.



The main dilemma in career counseling (Savickas, 2006):

Developing a relationship of proximity and facilitating the exploration of new possibilities, and the representative of society, in a position of greater distance, against which career plans are confronted.



Most frequent dilemmas in Public Employment Services (PES) across Europe (Sultana & Watts, 2006):

- 1) The tension between the humanistic and client-centered perspectives of the psychologist's personalized services and the realities of restricted labor market opportunities;
- 2) The conflict between job-placement targets and deadlines established at a political level, pressuring career counselors to shepherd clients into choices that are not in their best interests;
- 3) The short time allocated to the guidance interview makes the counselors wonder whether they are counseling or processing individuals;
- 4) The conflict between adopting a model based on empowerment and "career guidance services which position the client as a passive recipient of services".



Aim

To explore the main dilemmas that psychologists face when delivering career counseling;

To compare two groups of participants in career counseling according to the main settings where counseling occurs: employment and education.



Method

Participants

The participants included 24 experienced psychologists (22 women and 2 men) ranging from 30 to 53 years of age ($M = 41.54$; $SD = 5.89$)

Experience in career counseling ranged from 7 to 30 years, with an average of 15.56 ($SD = 6.69$)

Setting

Educational (n=10) - 5 in high schools and 5 in universities

Employment (n=14) - 2 in private practice, 1 in an outplacement service at a corporation, 1 in a bank at the human resources department, 5 in Public Employment Services (PES), and 5 in New Opportunities Services (NOS)



Method

Measures

A semi-structured interview protocol was designed to examine career counseling dilemmas

The central question: “Would you like to talk about the dilemmas you experience most when delivering career counseling?”

Subquestions for further exploration:

“Could you talk about an instance in which you experienced that dilemma?”

“It seems that your dilemmatic experience expresses two sides of you, two conflicting voices. Would you like to let us hear each one?”.



Method

The psychologists' accounts of their dilemmas were examined using consensual qualitative research method (Hill, Thompson & Williams, 1997).

The four authors of this paper constituted the research team, serving as interviewers and data analysts.



Table 1 – Domains, categories, frequencies and percentages regarding psychologists’ dilemmas in career counseling

Domain	Category ¹	Participants					
		Total N = 24		W/E N = 14		E N = 10	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Neutrality	To support or to confront clients’ career plans	Typical	70.1	Typical	57.1	Typical	90
	How to inform without biases?	VARIANT	12.5	Rare	7	Rare	20
Assessment	Should I satisfy demands for psychological tests?	VARIANT	12.5	VARIANT	14.3	Rare	10
Dual loyalty	To give or not to give more time to this client?	VARIANT	29.2	VARIANT	50	Rare	0
Role boundaries	Whether or not to intervene in the client's emotional problems	VARIANT	29.2	VARIANT	42.9	Rare	10
	Is the question relevant to me or to the client?	Rare	8.3	Rare	14.3	Rare	0
Confidentiality	To disclose or not to disclose information about the sessions	Rare	8.3	Rare	14.3	Rare	0

¹ Categories are *general* if they occur in all the cases, *typical* if they occur in more than half the cases, *variant* if they occur in less than half but more than two cases, and *rare* if they occur in one or two cases.

² W/E= Work/employment setting; E = Education setting.



Neutrality

The dilemma whether or not to confront the client career plans arose in three situations:

- 1) When the counselor thought that the client's psychological profile did not fit his/her career plans;
- 2) When the counselor believed that the client's career plans would be difficult to achieve in the current job market;
- 3) When the counselor considers the youngsters are not up to their own expectations.



Assessment

The dilemma of whether or not to give in to the pressure to use standardized psychological measures is present for different reasons:

- 1) The tests available are not suitable to the specific population and may harm the client;
- 2) The counselor feels that the client's desire to use standardized measures of assessment conflicts with the need to consider not using this type of evaluation.



Dual Loyalty

The counselor wonders whether his/her intervention serves mainly the needs and objectives of the organization or of the client

This kind of dilemma often happens when responding to a client's needs through a more prolonged intervention, which is frequently incompatible with the organization's objective that the counselor meet with a certain number of people daily.



Role Boundaries

The counselor struggles to decide whether or not to intervene in the client's emotional problems.

The conflict is between the roles of career counselor and clinical psychologist because there is a risk of exceeding the limits of their competence and/or established boundaries for a career-counseling relationship.



Discussion

The participants' dilemmas show the complexity of the process in career counseling, not only in its specificities but also in what it has in common with other modalities of counseling and psychotherapy.



Discussion

Specificities of career counseling:

1. The support to the career decision-making is one of the most challenging tasks that career counseling psychologists face;
2. The weight of standardized assessment tradition.



Discussion

Similarities between career counseling and other modalities of counseling or psychotherapy:

1. The importance of a working alliance to the success of the career counseling intervention;
2. The intervention in emotional issues originated from career issues;
3. The appropriateness of standardized measures to cultural specificities of certain populations;
4. The global modern-day economic forces influencing the dilemmas in career counseling practice that have implications for the nature of psychologists' working relationships with clients and the assistance delivered.



Discussion

Limitations

The reliance on the accounts of experienced counselors, which impedes the generalisability of the results to career counselors without a background in psychology or to those who are just beginning their careers.

The small number of dilemmas reported by each participant may be a limitation of the content validity of this study.



Discussion

Research implications

Developing a measure of career counseling dilemmas in order to clarify the relation of setting, counseling (e.g., career counseling self-efficacy, psychologists experience and epistemological development) and counselor variables (e.g., anxiety, self-esteem or personality) to the experience of dilemmas;

The study of how psychologists cope with the dilemmas that they confront when performing career counseling.



Discussion

Practical implications:

During psychologists' training the identification of dilemmas could stimulate a broad reflection on the career-counseling process:

- A reflection on the central questions made by theory and research on career counseling grounded in the real problems counselors face in the moment-to-moment process;
- A reflection considering information from various sources (e.g., what we learn about counseling, the client and our personal experience) in order to facilitate an understanding of the intersubjective reality in which dilemmas occur.