

Restoring Hope: Responding to Career Concerns of Immigrant Clients

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Abstract

Immigrants, whose career path is often different from the one described in traditional career theory, compose a large portion of the work force. As a result, a modified career theory and career counseling strategies that respond to this population's specific circumstances are needed. In this paper, issues in immigrant career transition are described, including barriers that interfere with the transition process and factors that contribute to its success. Immigrants face many intra-individual, relational, and contextual level barriers along with challenges of cultural adaptation. Successful transition relies on factors within the individual, such as adaptability and hardiness, and also on relational and systemic supports, such as family, language programs, and government sponsored organizations. Suggestions for counselling practice are offered, derived from a multi-leveled interactive conceptual framework. Interventions tailored to address individual, relational and contextual levels are presented, with an emphasis on social justice interventions that are seldom discussed in psychological literature. The author presents a part of her own experience to illustrate the issues.

I arrived at the Winnipeg International Airport in the sum-

mer of 1996, welcomed by the smiling faces of my husband and a few close friends. It felt good to reunite, and we were happy that the bureaucratic procedure that included extensive paperwork, medical exams, and a long wait was finally over. Prior to migration, I graduated from the University of Belgrade and worked for several years as a psychologist in a hospital. I made a decision to migrate in order to join my husband who had left the country due to circumstances of war. According to professional and administrative definitions, I was a voluntary migrant who had met the requirements of education and language proficiency outlined in the Canadian immigration guidelines. At the time this decision was made, my country was falling apart under the pressures of war that had brought upon us economic sanctions and consequent poverty. As a young adult, I was not only facing insecurities of my country's economic collapse, but was also dealing with adversities of war and isolation, including separation from my husband and his forced migration to North America.

Like many professionals trained in other countries, I lost the rights to practice as a psychologist in Canada and embarked on a long path towards re-establishing career that I perceived to be a crucial part of my identity. After a few jobs taken in order to survive, a degree and

career in Marriage and Family Therapy, and a couple of children, I am currently completing PhD studies in counseling psychology. Now in my forties, I can finally see a possibility of practicing in my chosen field again. This prospect is exciting and scary, as I have struggled between letting go and holding onto my identity as a psychologist in the past sixteen years.

A number of privileges along this path enabled me to arrive at this point, privileges that many immigrants are not so fortunate to have. This included white skin, physical ability, education, English proficiency, belief in my capacity to succeed, economically self-reliant community left behind, familiarity with European cultures and traditions, and strong support of my husband. Without these privileges, my current education would likely have not been an option.

The notion of migration is frequently romanticized and associated with images of a better life, safety, and increased access to economic and occupational resources. In the hope of a better future for their families and themselves, immigrants leave homelands and arrive at new landscapes where they have to build lives, establish careers, and find ways to adapt. After an initial sense of relief, many immigrants find themselves struggling with a difficult transition in which vocational obstacles fre-



quently serve as a major source of stress (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008; Yakushko, Watson & Thompson, 2008). Challenges often include unemployment, underemployment, loss of previously held professional credentials, and professional status, change from professional to service and manual labour, extended work hours, and lengthy periods of time away from families (Pope, Cheng, & Leong, 1998; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008; Yeh, Kim, Pituc & Atkins, 2008; Yost & Lucas, 2002). Research indicates that over one half of the recent Canadian immigrants does not work in their specialized professional field after immigration, despite being highly qualified. They earn less, are more likely unemployed and underemployed, and have a limited perspective for career advancement (Chen, 2008).

Immigrant career path is often different from that of persons who grew up exposed to career discourses typically described in traditional career theories (Holland, 1997; Super, 1957). Career counselling with immigrant clients requires understanding of this population's unique and complex circumstances, and a set of practical tools specifically tailored to address issues of immigrant career development. Unfortunately, psychological knowledge regarding career experiences of immigrants is relatively sparse. In their review of four major professional career related journals, Flores, Hsieh and Chiao (2011) found that only 0.01% of all articles

published in a recent twenty year period address immigrants' career development. This is surprising, considering that numbers of immigrants have been steadily increasing in North America in the past few decades.

The purpose of this paper is to outline issues that the immigrant population faces in their process of career transitioning and to offer practical suggestions for career counsellors working with immigrant clients. Labels, such as immigrants, can be harmful and it is necessary to clearly define this term. While acknowledging her own ambivalence about the term immigrant, the author maintained this terminology for the sake of consistency with existing literature. Immigrants are considered to be voluntary migrants whose decision to move is mainly motivated by economic, social, and familial factors, and are generally able to return to their countries of origin if they choose to (Yakushko, Watson & Thompson, 2008; Yost, 2002).

The Experience of Career Transition in Immigrants

In spite of the significant relationship between unemployment/underemployment and health, largely established in the general population, little is known about the impact of career transition on immigrant health and well being (Aycan & Berry, 1996). Psychological literature has yet to provide information about the role employment below the level of one's educational preparation and additional challenges of adaption to a new coun-

try play in career transition of immigrants. Career can be a significant source of empowerment in the new country through creating opportunities to learn about the culture and language (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008), providing a sense of meaning, decreasing social isolation, and defining status and identity (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Ishiyama, 1995). Aycan and Berry (1996) found that duration of unemployment and current employment status have critical implications for well-being and adaptation of immigrants. The decline in employment status and difficulty regaining or achieving upward mobility have been found to increase acculturation stress, resulting in negative self-concept, alienation from the society, and adaptation difficulties (Aycan & Berry, 1996). Other scholars suggest that unemployment, economic hardship, and job demands constitute major factors contributing to depression, anxiety, and mental illness in the immigrant population (Ishiyama, 1995; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008). These factors not only affect individual migrants, but also have a significant impact on their relationships and family dynamics, causing intergenerational conflict and transforming family roles (Pope, Cheng & Leong, 1998; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008; Yost & Lucas, 2002). Asanin Dean & Wilson (2009) identify three main pathways through which employment/underemployment affects mental health of immigrants. First, lack



of income is particularly important for those in the position of supporting their families. Second, immigrants experience de-skilling, or a loss of skills previously acquired through education and work, due to their inability to continue in their chosen career. Third, identities tied to one's role of a breadwinner, a professional, or a person employed in the society are lost, which results in a significant degradation of social status.

Most of the existing literature on immigrant career transition focuses on barriers that immigrants face in their attempt to establish a career in the host country and on associated challenges. Consistent with contemporary career theory that suggests a view of career as inseparable from general life and personal concerns (Krumboltz, 1993; Pope, Cheng & Leong, 1998; Savickas, 2009; Super, 1993), immigrant career transition is often described in the context of a larger adaptation process.

Barriers Affecting Immigrant Career Transition

After a long wait and separation from my husband, I was happy to sign any documents at the Canadian Embassy that would allow us to move on with our lives. I was warned that I might not be able to practice as a psychologist in Canada, but career was not my primary concern at the time. I was in my late twenties, and my plan was to re-train in order to eventually re-claim my professional identity. As a young couple without children, having a considerable level of

education and being relatively proficient in English, we were equipped with privileges that would allow us to complete the required training and re-claim occupational rights. We did not have an obligation to support children, although for several years during the war we sent money to our family members who stayed behind. As I attempted to enroll as a graduate psychology student, I learned about financial pressures, GRE requirements, and the need to study materials very similar to what I had already learned back home. The cost of the application for multiple training sites, and tuition for years of graduate training in psychology were way above what was affordable. As new immigrants, we could not move to another Canadian city or to the US to study. The GRE test that was designed for native English speakers seemed impossible to pass. My path to becoming a graduate student in my chosen field was engulfed by insurmountable financial and systemic obstacles. This experience was devastating, as my options for re-claiming this significant part of my identity seemed very limited. The future of my career appeared bleak.

Many barriers that delay immigrant integration into the work force and significantly affect career transition have been identified. Research demonstrates that educational and career barriers that are encountered become internalized into immigrants' belief system consequently limiting career aspirations (Jackson, Kacanski, Rust & Beck, 2006). Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson,

Ngaruiya & Gonzalez (2008) classify barriers into individual, group, and contextual. Group and contextual level barriers significantly overlap and will be considered together. In addition, the author believes that it is important to consider the influence of significant relationships in immigrant career transition.

Intra-individual barriers. Barriers in immigrant career transition, most commonly described in psychological literature, could be classified as individual level barriers. This includes language proficiency issues (Amundson, Yeung, Sun, Chan & Cheng, 2011; Aycan & Berry, 1996; Ishiyama, 1989; Leong & Serafica, 1995; Ma & Yeh, 2010; Yost & Lucas, 2002;), individual differences in cultural adjustment (Lee & Westwood, 1996; Aycan & Berry, 1996), unrealistic expectations prior to migration (Lee & Westwood, 1996), and lack of job finding techniques (Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991). Other intra-individual barriers that have been described are lack of knowledge regarding the labour market and the community, no clear and feasible career goals, lack of awareness of services (Amundson, Yeung, Sun, Chan & Cheng, 2011), difficulty in self-validation (Ishiyama, 1995), skills, education, emotional and cognitive challenges (Koert, Borgen & Amundson, 2011). Personal characteristics such as age, gender, and marital status can also enable or slow down immigrant career transition (Yost & Lucas, 2002). Intra-individual focus, typical within the psychological discipline, offers



strategies for improving immigrant career transition through removal of intrapersonal obstacles and through increased adjustment to the new culture. These strategies mostly focus on learning new skills and on developing a level of flexibility necessary for career adjustment, often involving a career change. For example, career counsellors can help clients look for ways to strengthen language skills, retrain (Lee & Westwood, 1996), develop efficient self-validation strategies (Ishiyama, 1995), rehearse mock job interviews (Ma & Yeh, 2010), and enhance personal skills such as hardiness (Koert, Borgen & Amundson, 2011). Limited findings indicate that there is an increase in status and earnings over time, as a result of language skill development and expanded familiarity with cultural and business related practices (Aycaan & Berry, 1996).

Although it offers helpful tools to career counsellors, a pure intra-individual approach may not be sufficient for understanding the career transition experience of immigrant clients. Career transition does not happen in isolation, and is embedded in a larger network of relationships, society, and culture that enables or thwarts individual attempts. Hartung and Blustein (2002) suggest that a career decision making model should incorporate differences not only in individual decision making styles, but also in one's access to social and economic opportunities. In spite of being aware of the fact that they need to improve their language skills or retrain, many immigrants are limited in their efforts

by realities of our capitalist society. Long working hours, time away from the family, and low paying jobs become obstacles to language or educational advancement (Ma & Yeh, 2010; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008). Due to financial pressures of supporting families in the new country and the ones left behind, many immigrants are unable to take language classes (Flores et al., 2011; Yost & Lucas, 2002). Re-training is not an option for many immigrant professionals, due to systemic obstacles that are outside the boundaries of their power. According to Bauder (2003), immigrant labour has been systematically devalued through regulatory institutions' active exclusion of immigrants from the upper segments of the labour market. As professional associations, regulatory bodies, and employers give preference to native born and educated workers, access to the most highly desired occupations is systematically denied to immigrants, resulting in eventual loss of skill, or de-skilling. Migrants whose foreign education and credentials are not recognized in the host country are often limited in access to employment due to the differential assessment of their credentials and work experience (Bauder, 2003). For many such migrants, the path towards re-establishing the original career and related occupational and social status is very long and extremely difficult (Chen, 2008).

Relationship, group, and context level barriers. Unpredictable contextual factors, which

have a significant impact on the immigrants' transition, negate the concept of linear individual career development, implied in traditional career theory (Holland, 1997; Supper, 1980). According to Stableton (2007), contextual factors are "any events or circumstances that have an impact on an individual's life-career" (p. 293). Circumstances such as fleeing one's country of origin, political oppression, history, labour laws, natural disasters, violence and poverty are examples of such contextual factors. The author argues that our understanding of career development needs to take into account the role of family, community, history, socio-cultural, and political circumstances influencing one's career (Stableton, 2007).

The contextual lens has been widely acknowledged in contemporary career theory that calls attention to variables extending far beyond the individual experience (Blustein, Palladino, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Hartung & Blustein, 2002; Pryor & Bright 2009; Richardson, in press; Young, Valach & Collin, 2002). Although these contemporary theorists significantly differ in their approach to career, most modern conceptualizations of career development call attention to trends of globalization, and the changing nature of labour market and work contexts. Modern social trends, which affect career development of all society members, are especially salient for immigrants who, by definition, change life and work contexts through migration.

The effect of relational variables on career development



has been demonstrated in literature on social support. Relational support from family and others are critical factors in promoting academic success and career aspiration of immigrant youth (Jackson, Kacanski, Rust & Back, 2006). Government sponsored support systems and community resources have been identified as helpful factors in immigrant career success (Koert, Borgen & Amundson, 2011), while absence of such supports can be major impeding factors in immigrant career transition.

Group and contextual barriers that have been described in the literature include cultural values, immigration status, experiences of oppression and discrimination (Ma & Yeh, 2010; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008), strain on family roles, separation from the family left behind, and loss of support networks (Flores et al., 2011). Aycan and Berry (1996) identify four major barriers that delay integration of immigrants into the work force in Canada. These barriers include lack of recognition of occupational accreditation and education; the requirement for foreign trained candidates to take occupation specific tests that are very demanding, expensive, culturally biased and unfairly administered; inadequate language training; and "Canadian work experience".

Chen (2008) argues that unfamiliarity with the new culture is one of the major challenges in immigrant life-career transition. In addition to job-specific skills, immigrants often experience issues in cross-cultural adjustment, culture shock, and

unfamiliarity with cultural norms resulting in a need to negotiate cultures. It has been demonstrated that the impact of these challenges lessens with cultural immersion and expanded experience (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Chen, 2008).

Other systemic barriers, however, are much more difficult to overcome. Requirements of Canadian credentials and "Canadian experience" place newcomers in a no-win position, systematically devaluing knowledge, experience, and human and cultural capital that immigrants bring to their new country (Bauder, 2003; Chen, 2008). "In most cases, foreign-earned credentials and qualifications become invalid in Canada, leading to a total loss of previous professional status and/or a re-qualification process that requires a huge amount of time, energy, and money" (Chen, 2008, p. 430). In addition, newcomers are often misinformed that their professional credentials will be valued in the host country (Neault, 2005). Recognition of professional qualifications is a jurisdiction of regulatory professional bodies, such as colleges of physicians, teachers, psychologists, and engineers, which require Canadian-earned education and work experience that most immigrants do not possess. Immigrants can gain "Canadian experience" through accepting labour below one's level of educational preparation and work experience. As their expertise acquired in the country of origin eventually diminishes, accepting such jobs leads to de-skilling and loss of cultural and human capital both

in the country of origin and in the receiving country (Bauder, 2003). According to Asanin Dean & Wilson (2007), fifty five percent of skilled immigrants in Ontario who are able to find work within the first six months in the country do so outside of their field of expertise, mostly accepting part time jobs. The phenomenon of de-skilling exacerbates health problems not only for the individual migrants but also for their families (Asanin Dean & Wilson, 2007).

Another source of systemic barriers is related to the host culture's attitudes towards immigrants and related oppressive practices. Immigrants can be seen as competitors in the labour market, as intruders in one's territory, or as difficult to interact with (Lee & Westwood, 1996). Yakushko, Watson & Thompson (2008) suggest that oppression, rooted in racism, sexism, xenophobia, and poverty, is one of the major sources of stress faced by immigrants. According to Ishiyama (1995), immigrants often face invalidating experiences related to loss of identity, role, sense of competence, and status while lacking validating community. As they leave behind large parts of community that used to act as a powerful buffer in stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the need for a validating community becomes even more prominent.

The current state of the labour market, characterized by unpredictable workforce opportunities and lower earning potential, is a significant contextual factor that immigrants are faced with (Koert, Borgen & Amund-



son, 2011). In today's unstable economy, immigrants have a difficult time securing employment and also face severe discrimination.

Barriers stemming from challenges of cultural adaptation.

In the first year after immigration, I found myself mourning numerous losses – loss of familiar language, scenery and smells, loss of occupation and status, loss of cultural and family rituals, and, most of all, loss of the relationship network that used to provide support and envelop my experience with meaning. A sudden shift to becoming a minority group member, a person with a foreign accent, and a professional whose education and experience were not recognized resulted in feelings of powerlessness. Our priority was to survive economically and psychologically, so my husband and I secured employment below the level of our education that paid a minimum wage. Some job searching strategies seemed strange, as marketing one's skills and emphasizing one's accomplishments were contrary to humility that was valued in our culture. We had to learn much in respect to the job market, educational system, and re-training opportunities. In addition to separation from family and friends who stayed behind, realization that we might not be able to re-claim our previous occupations was very painful. Even though we were willing to "re-train" and believed we had the capacity to do so, obstacles to receiving education in the new country further contributed to a sense of loss,

powerlessness, and anxiety about our future.

As the notion of career is inseparable from general life and personal concerns (Krumboltz, 1993; Super, 1993; Savickas et al., 2009), career transition experience of immigrants needs to be viewed in the context of their experience adapting in the new country. According to Chen (2008), "many immigrants gradually gain a real sense of settling down only after they have rebuilt their vocational life" (p. 428). The quality of transitional experience in other aspects of personal and social lives significantly depends on the quality of career transition (Chen, 2008).

Migration related phenomena that are considered to be significant obstacles to career adjustment are culture shock (Chen, 2008; Yost & Lucas, 2002), acculturation stress (Berry, 1997), immigration stress (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008; Yakushko, Watson & Thompson, 2008), and cultural dislocation (Ishiyama, 1995). Culture shock is defined as anxiety caused from contact with a new and unknown culture, resulting in feelings of confusion, loss, and powerlessness that follow the loss of familiar cultural cues and social norms (Oberg, 1960). Concepts of acculturation stress and immigration stress draw attention to pressures imposed on internal resources in coping with the new environment. Cultural dislocation is a subjective experience of feeling displaced in a given socio-cultural environment, stemming from a lack of validation of self, feelings of cultural uprootedness,

and conflict regarding cultural differences (Ishiyama, 1995).

Another concept commonly used in the literature is acculturation, a set of phenomena that result when a person from a certain culture comes into continuous first-hand contact with another culture, including subsequent changes in the original culture patterns (Berry, 1997). Similarly to other above described concepts, the concept of acculturation often implies a unidirectional nature of change resulting from cultural interaction and can be problematic as such. It is implied that an acculturated individual is the one who has made changes necessary to fit into the dominant culture's system even if this is done at a detriment to her/his own well being. An immigrant employed below her/his level of preparation, in order to support her/his family, could be seen as acculturated regardless of the impact her/his occupational situation has on her/his health and career. In this context, the concept of acculturation can further reinforce circumstances that unjustly disempower an immigrant population.

In understanding immigrant career transition experience, it is important to consider pre-migration, migration, and post-migration sources of stress and validation (Mock, 1998). Pre-migration circumstances may include involuntary migration, (un)available support, expectations, losses, reversibility of the move, experiences of threat, and pre-migration trauma. Migration and post-migration stressors may include stress of relocation, immigration status, acculturation



stress, relational stress, loss of social status and social contact, and oppression (Yakushko, Watson & Thompson, 2008). It is important to note that the relationship between adaptational stressors and career transition process is bi-directional. While adaptation stressors may interfere with career transition, successful career transition aids cultural adaptation in the new country (Chen, 2008).

Bhatia and Ram (2009) argue for a fluid and politicized understanding of immigrant identity, calling for a shift from conceptualizing acculturation and immigrant identity as an individual process to a broader contextual and political phenomenon. According to these authors, identity should not be defined in terms of fixed absolute essences but rather as a creation of cultural discourses, history, and power. Cultural identity is about “positioning” – it is situated in historical context, bound up in a set of political positions and entails negotiation, dislocation and conflict (Bhatia & Ram, 2009). In conceptualizing issues that immigrants face in the process of cultural interchange, the field of career counselling needs a bi-directional understanding of this process. Considering that both immigrants and their new context change as a result of the intercultural exchange, it would be helpful to examine how the new environment can provide optimal conditions for adaptation. In addition to helping clients adjust to their new cultures, counsellors can advocate for changes in the new culture that will result in optimal benefits for both the new-

comers and the new country. By not doing so, counsellors risk helping clients adjust to unjust situations, which may be the source of the clients’ problems in the first place (Waldegrave, 2005).

Success Stories: Helpful Factors in Immigrant Career Transition

I consider mine to be a success story, replete with obstacles, persistent effort, belief in my capacity to be a psychologist, and with plenty of support along the way. This was not a straightforward path. I have made a “detour”, acquiring a Master’s Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy, in a program where my skills were recognized and my contributions were valued. I was lucky to come across mentors and colleagues who saw my potential and supported my pursuit in becoming established in the field of family therapy. I was also fortunate to have a very supportive partner who stood by me during a long adaptation period. With new confidence, experience, and excellent references, I found the courage to apply to a PhD program in counselling psychology and was accepted. Once again, I found myself fortunate to have my potential recognized by my new PhD program. Fourteen years after immigration, I was on my way to reclaiming my long lost professional identity. In my ten-year career as a family therapist, I have had the honour of witnessing many similar stories and was amazed by resourcefulness and resilience of many successful immigrant clients.

Although it is important to name and describe barriers that stand in the way of immigrant career transition, viewing this group only through the lens of challenge further contributes to stereotyping and discrimination. In spite of obstacles, many immigrants are successful in accomplishing life and career goals. With the focus on deficit in the psychological literature, strengths, resilience, and community networks are often disregarded (Yakushko, Watson & Thompson, 2008), and factors that contribute to successful adaptation are neglected in research. A small body of recently emerging literature has shed light on successful cultural and career adaptation in immigrants. In a study examining factors that helped and hindered successful coping with work related challenges of immigrant women, Koert, Borgen and Amundson (2001) identified a range of helpful internal and external factors. Internal factors described by successful immigrant women were beliefs, traits, values, inner strength, resilience, active search for skills and resources, and self-care. The external factors included relationships and support from family, friends, community, religious groups, government and community resources, and characteristics of the work environment such as positive interaction, training, orientation, flexibility, and team-work (Koert, Borgen & Amundson, 2011). Another study of the transition experience of successful Chinese immigrants indicated four major success factors: 1. Having a positive attitude and personality; 2. Skills and re-



source development; 3. Education and work experience background; and 4. Community and family support (Amundson, Yeung, Cun, Chen & Cheng, 2011). In a study on academic success and career aspirations of immigrant youth, Jackson, Kancanski, Rust & Back (2006) found that contextual supports, particularly relational support from family and others were critical factors in promoting academic success and career aspiration.

Even though the studies described above may be limited as they reflect values of the cultures of their participants, they consistently demonstrate that immigrant career transition needs to be approached from a multi-leveled and holistic perspective. In addition to attitude, personality, skills, and resiliency, factors such as relationships, government sponsored support systems, and community resources have also been identified as helpful in successful career transition. This research indicates importance of internal, relational, and contextual factors in successful career transition.

Suggestions for Counselling Practice

Based on the issues identified in career transition, career counselling can be tailored to address challenges and support immigrant efforts towards their chosen career goals.

Goals of Career Counselling with Immigrants

The goals of career coun-

selling with the immigrant population can be conceptualized as: 1. Helping clients cope with loss, ambiguity, and unjust socio-political situations; 2. Establishing and/or strengthening factors helpful in a successful career transition; and 3. Removing contextual barriers that hinder successful career transition. Various types of strategies can be used to work towards these goals. To help clients cope with loss, ambiguity, and unjust situations, strategies such as listening, acknowledging, naming, raising consciousness, and collaboration in challenging unjust situations can be used. Focusing on factors helpful in career transition, counsellors can use interventions aimed at fostering resiliency or hardiness. To remove the contextual barriers, strategies of advocating, education, and research can be used.

To accomplish these goals, career counsellors need to obtain a thorough understanding of this population's concerns, pay attention to how their own experiences and cultural heritage shape this understanding, remain a high degree of openness, and use appropriate interventions.

Establishing a More Complex Picture

The experience of career transition in immigrants is influenced by a number of factors functioning on intrapersonal, relational, and contextual levels. This is a multidirectional process and affects not only the individual in transition, but also relationships, groups, and systems that she/he is a part of. A deeper understanding of the career transi-

tion process of this population needs to be rooted in an integrative approach that takes into consideration intrapersonal, relational, and larger contextual levels. In the context of career theory, this means going beyond integration of personal and career issues (Krumboltz, 1993; Super, 1993), in order to intervene on the level of relationships and contexts that individuals are embedded in (Blustein, 2001; Blustein, McWhirter & Perry, 2005). It also requires abandoning the unidirectional model of career and cultural adaptation, and replacing it with a dynamic interactional model. The following diagram illustrates a model for understanding career transition of immigrants that is both contextual and interactional. This integrative conceptual framework draws from the ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), applications of which have been recommended in counselling of immigrant populations (Yakushko & Chronister, 2005), and from the systems theory of career counselling described by McMahan and Patton (2006).

As illustrated in Figure 1., career is embedded in a larger context of personality and individual's life, a network of relationships, and a larger cultural-socio-political context. Changes and events on each level affect all other levels and may aid or hinder career transition.

The individual level contains information regarding personal and career aspirations, experience of career transition, educational and professional accomplishments pre migration,

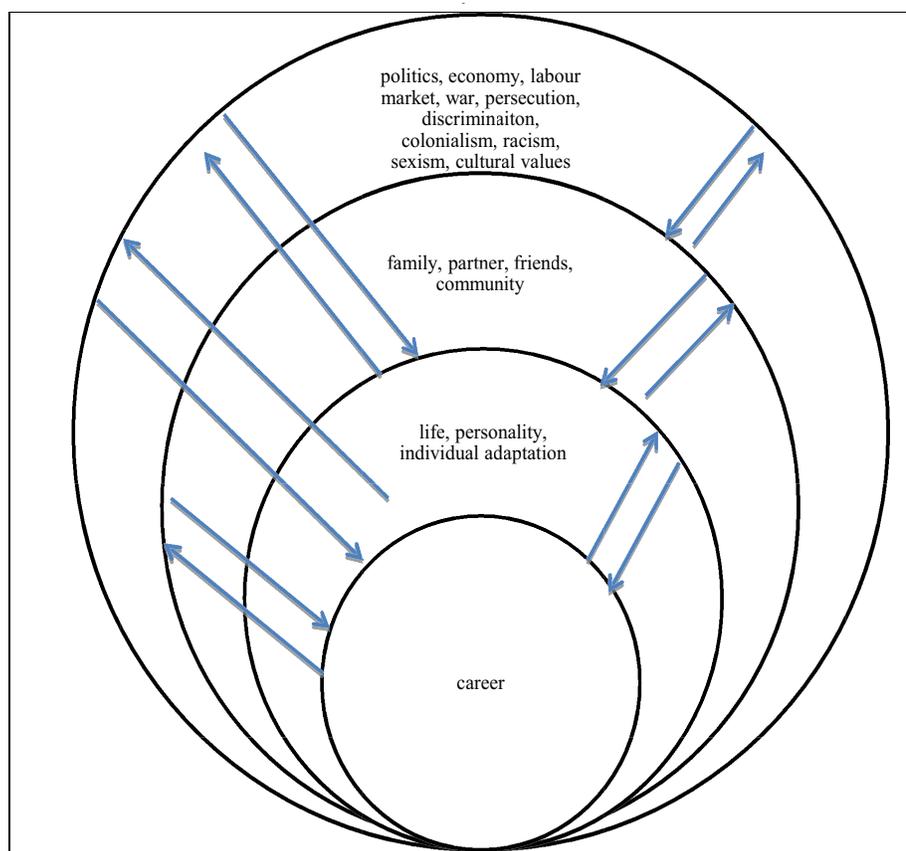


Figure 1. Integrative Interactional Model of Career Transition

(in)validation of career related achievements in the new country, and feelings of loss and grief. Career related exploration needs to be placed in the context of the person's life experiences, struggles, goals, and dreams. This might mean exploring the meaning of career in the client's individual and cultural environments, examining how it relates to a sense of identity, and where it fits in the larger context of one's past, present, and future.

The relational level involves changes in family and community functioning related to migration and career transition. Consideration of this level may include family loyalty, interpersonal connections, those left behind, those that the client feels obligated to support, those who offer support to the client, and other relational concerns. Estab-

lishing new relationships and strengthening one's community of support may be a crucial part of the career transition process.

The contextual level contains predictable and unpredictable factors (Pryor & Bright, 2009), including career related cultural norms and values, social identity, ethnic and other communities, school system, government, helping agencies, medical, and school system. It is characterized by culturally defined constructs such as gender, and experiences of oppression and discrimination related to clients' various social locations. War, exile, voluntary or involuntary nature of migration, and range of options available are also significant contextual factors.

In addition to providing a way of conceptualizing the transition experience of immigrants,

this multileveled interactive framework can offer tools for intervening on each level.

Individual Level Interventions

Most career counselling approaches primarily rely on individual quantitative and qualitative assessment and counselling tools description of which can be found elsewhere (Amundson, Harris-Bowlsbey & Niles, 2009; Brott, 2004; Campbell & Ungar, 2004; McIlveen, McGregor-Bayne, Alcock & Hjertum, 2003; McMahon & Patton, 2002). Depending on the client's unique circumstances, a career counselor can draw from a number of interventions, such as questionnaires, inventories, behavioural observation, interview, autobiography and biography, games, card sorts, life line, life role circles, the goal map, and many other. These tools may be useful in identifying intra-individual strengths and growing edges, and in building skills, attitudes, and personality factors helpful in immigrant career transition. For example, strategies aimed at increasing the level of resiliency and hardiness, such as portfolios (Borgen, Amundson & Reuter, 2004), or career narratives (Campbell & Ungar, 2004) can be used.

Literature on immigrant career counselling suggests individually focused strategies such as pre-departure preparation, discussion of culture shock, learning about local labour market, increasing language proficiency, and enhancing work related intercultural competences (Amundson, Westwood & Prefontaine,



1995; Ma & Yeh, 2010; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008; Yost & Lucas, 2002). Selected interventions need to make sense to clients in their contexts. Clients who hold different cultural values may not benefit from interventions designed in the White Northern American culture, and may appreciate more culturally relevant tools, such as storytelling, or community approach (Stebleton, 2007).

Relationship Level Interventions

For the counselling process to be successful, immigrant clients need to feel valued, understood, and supported (Ishiyama, 1995), which requires a complex combination of cultural, interpersonal, and personal skills on the part of the counsellor. In addition to strong counselling skills, knowledge about immigrant issues and awareness of the counsellor's own cultural assumptions is necessary.

Relationship level interventions can be aimed at helping clients examine roles and obligations in families and communities, validating their loyalty, and exploring changes in relationship and family functioning that are related to their career concerns. Considering the importance of support system in immigrant transition, strategies can be established for strengthening existing social networks, negotiating relationships with significant ones left behind, and building new relationships. Family roles, inter-generational conflict, and intercultural negotiation can be-

come the focus of career counselling sessions when relevant to the client's career concerns. Significant others can be important witnesses of career experience and competencies for immigrant clients who have lost professional rights in the new country. Using the Significant Other Questionnaire, or discussing how clients are being perceived by their significant others, can offer a new perspective on clients' strengths, abilities, and work experience (Amundson, Westwood & Prefontaine, 1995). Successful immigrant role models and mentoring programs can also be helpful (Ma & Yeh, 2010).

Context Level Interventions

The field of career counselling has been critiqued for a lack of attention to contextual factors and for inaction regarding issues of social justice (Blustein, McWhirter & Perry, 2005; Hansen, 2003; Hartung & Blustein, 2002; Stebleton, 2007). Blustein, McWhirter & Perry (2005) suggest that vocational psychology has a potential to improve the education and working lives of all people by assuming an activist social justice agenda. According to Hartung and Blustein (2002), a just model of career decision making includes attention to the opportunity structure, in addition to differences in decision making styles. Counsellors should move to action through partnering with communities and other service providers in order to provide integrated intervention programs.

In addressing career concerns of immigrant clients, it is

not enough to acknowledge the loss of unrecognized credentials, discuss it, and help clients consider information about training, as suggested by majority of the counselling literature. Consistent with the social justice model, counsellors need to take a step beyond helping clients adjust to the unjust circumstances (Waldegrave, 2005), and work towards changing these circumstances to create equal opportunities. While acknowledgment of the loss of professional identity and exploration of training options are crucial aspects of counselling (Lee & Westwood, 1996), it is important to consider a full range of alternatives. This may include challenging the system that unjustly de-skills trained and experienced immigrant workers.

Immigrant workers are a minority work group that may not always speak out against poor conditions that they are facing (Flores et al., 2011). Equipped with knowledge regarding the impact of discrimination, oppression, and injustice, counsellors can address these issues through theory and social action, which requires stepping outside the boundaries of traditional counselling practice. Social action may involve building relationships with employers, advocating for more accessible training and hiring practices, conducting workshops for potential employers, training government representatives and legislators, and educating workers on their right and responsibilities (Flores et al., 2011). Other types of action include consultation, community outreach, program evaluation, and engagement with teachers, families, clinicians, and



administration (Blustein, McWhirter & Perry, 2005).

Immigrants are typically involved with a number of systems, such as medical and legal organizations, language schools, welfare, childcare programs, and ethnic communities. Assuming a collaborative approach in which these various systems are connected would help provide a more integrated holding environment for immigrant clients.

Counsellors need to be careful to not narrowly conceptualize this group as oppressed and helpless (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008), but to actively engage immigrant clients and community into partnerships that will help remove barriers standing in the way of successful career transition.

Counsellor Competencies and Training Issues

As a form of counselling, career counselling of immigrants requires proficiency in complex relational and counselling skills. Career counsellors need to attend to intricacies of working with diverse populations (Sue & Sue, 2002), potential language issues, unfamiliarity with counselling, and different cultural healing practices. They need to be aware of their own cultural legacies, able to challenge own assumptions (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya & Gonzalez, 2008), and knowledgeable about issues such as migration, colonialism, oppression, and armed conflict. Career counsellors are seldom trained to provide contextual interventions, build team ap-

proaches, be aware of immigrant related issues, or challenge their own cultural assumptions (Flores, Hsieh & Chiao, 2011; Hansen, 2003). In order to better equip career counsellors with these skills, training programs need to include materials on affecting social change, immigrant issues, and awareness of one's own cultural values and related assumptions. To offer a comprehensive and fair service to immigrant clients, counselling psychology also needs to recruit more immigrant members into its profession and its leadership (Hansen, 2003).

Conclusion

Since immigrants' hope for a better future may be diminished by barriers encountered in the new country, career counselling with this population involves restoration of hope. With a sense of hope, an immigrant client will be able to envision meaningful goals and believe that positive outcomes are likely to occur if specific actions are taken (Niles, Amundson & Neault, 2011). The counselling process can increase the level of hopefulness through several mechanisms. A trusting counselling relationship characterized by a true understanding of circumstances surrounding the immigrant client's career transition is crucial. In addition to individual level variables, often emphasized in career counselling theory, counsellors need to pay attention to relational and systemic factors that affect successful transition. Other necessary steps include collaborative examination of available options; exploration of

ways in which the range of options can be expanded; and action towards challenging systems that strip away identity, knowledge, and power from minority groups, such as immigrants. Learning that the counsellor is on their side and that change is possible, immigrant clients can start re-claiming their power and re-establishing hope for a better future.

Whether a life story is about success or failure is partly a matter of interpretation. I consider mine to be a success story, although it is also a story about loss, struggle, and inability to train or practice in my chosen field. As many other immigrants, I have experienced de-skilling and am now working towards rebuilding some of the skills. Obstacles that immigrants face in their process of career transition are enormous. These obstacles unnecessarily block us from contributing our expertise to society, causing loss of capital, and affecting our health and well-being. A more equal access to employment opportunities would not only promote immigrant health, but would also bring economic benefits to their new country.

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