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CAREER HAPPINESS—SPECIAL ISSUE

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Chapter 7

Career Adaptability, Well-being, and Possible Selves

by Geoffrey Plimmer, Mike Smith, Michael Duggan,
and Paul Englert

Abstract

This chapter explores the potential contribution of well-being and self-psychology to improving the outcomes of career counseling, in particular career happiness. The article identifies similarities between the adaptability construct (Savickas, 1997) and well-being psychology (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and explores their application to career counseling. Some of the key themes that emerge from both adaptability and well-being research are: a long-term perspective, development of the self, consideration of relationships between the self and the outer world, and a future focus. The Possible Selves construct (Markus & Nurius, 1986), a means of considering all these points, is positioned as the link between well-being and career development. This article discusses the role of other constructs such as 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and practical ways in which counselors can use these ideas to foster happiness. Counselors can work with clients to: 1) identify possible selves, 2) build a long-term, future focused perspective, and 3) develop effective motivation and self-regulation in goal attainment.

Career psychology and general psychology have typically neglected well-being and life satisfaction research as a source of how to improve peoples' lives. Both branches of psychology have focused on the aetiology of unhappiness: cognitive and behavioural deficits, erroneous career beliefs, and "abnormal psychology." In this sense well-being is seen as the absence of negative affect such as depression, anxiety, or other abnormal psychological functioning. However, happiness and unhappiness are distinct, the absence of one does not mean the presence of another (Diener, 1984). Well-being and related constructs provide a series of new outcomes, and processes within the person, that create a

new series of counseling techniques to guide clients toward career happiness.

In recent years a tighter explication of the psychology of well-being occurs (e.g., Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Well-being includes self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Concurrently, adaptability is emerging as a key construct in career success (Savickas, 1997). It emphasizes that people look to the future in order to improve the match between themselves and the outer world, and at the same time develop themselves. Well-being and adaptability share an emphasis on fostering a long-term perspective, development of the self, management of relationships between the self and outer world, and emphasis on the future.

Fostering a Long-term Perspective

Counselors can foster both adaptability and well-being by encouraging clients to think about themselves, and also to participate in activities that develop both themselves and their environments (Amundson, 1998). Developmental theories of well-being recognize the capacity of individuals to both shape and select their environments, that in turn shape us throughout the life span (Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg, 1986). A long-term approach to career planning provides a means of inoculating clients against a loss of adaptability in later life (Ward, 1999). Some examples from the developmental psychology literature indicate that:

- Interest in a range of intellectually stimulating activities seems to increase intelligence from early to mid adulthood. For example Eichorn, Hunt, and Honzik (1981) found that IQ could increase or decrease by up to 20 points between early adulthood and mid adulthood (36–48 years of age), with the highest increasers characterised by overseas travel as young adults, and a balance of independence, socialization, and confidence. Decreasers were marked by heavy alcohol consumption.
- A flexible personality style at mid-age reduces the risk of later cognitive decline, as does above average education, involvement in complex and intellectually stimulating activities, mid-age life satisfaction, an intact family and a smart spouse (Schaie, 1994). The ability to live “life well” in one phase of adulthood (e.g., to have a variety of interests and good relationships) reduces the likelihood of difficulties in later life. Equally, a poor lifestyle habit points to increasing cognitive rigidity, a low level of adaptability, and declining abilities.

- Counselors can encourage clients to focus on long-term outcomes by asking them to focus on and elaborate individualized relevant views of themselves in the future, and then to identify long-term outcomes of their current lifestyles and choices. Pursuit of these hoped for future self-concepts provides a high-level goal from which clients can make more immediate, molecular level choices such as whether to give up smoking, continue with studies, or to travel. Thus, career counseling has a preventative element that encourages a long-term orientation as a means to live life well (Savickas, 1997).

Development of the Self Through Identifying and Using Flow Experiences

“Flow,” or “optimal experience,” is intuitively appealing to lay people as a means of self-development. Flow occurs through the pursuit of active, challenging, and absorbing activities where one loses a sense of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow has the ability to assist individuals by directing vocational and other choices to activities where flow is likely. It provides a powerful means of self-change by providing personal experiences related to the pursuit of goals that in turn create harmony within the self.

A critical element of flow is that tasks must be difficult but achievable, thus ensuring that people doing flow activities are always developing their skill levels (Warr, 1987). Through the experience of flow, including the achievement of difficult tasks, and the state of being in harmony with oneself, negative self-aspects such as low self-esteem diminish.

Flow has the ability to assist individuals with vocational choice, and life and self-change, by directing choices to activities where flow is likely (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi and Le Fevre (1989) found that flow is reported more often in work type activities rather than stereotyped leisure ones, such as lying on a beach, or conducting other passive, non-challenging activities. Thus the flow construct provides a framework for counselors and clients to assess attributions affecting balances between work and leisure; to provide a means of appreciating what one gains from work experiences which may have negative aspects; and to develop the self and to pursue activities in which flow occurs.

Management of Relationships Between the Self and Outer World

Magnusson and Redekopp (1992) focused on the relationship between the self and the outer world, rather than direct development of the self as the flow construct does. The Magnusson and Redekopp adaptability framework essentially provides a risk management tool for career

change. This valuable contribution reduces the risk of a self-focused career exploration leading to the pursuit of unrealistic aspirations and goals, or failing to identify dysfunctional elements of a client's relationship with the outer world.

Adaptability was defined as competence, self-management, and salience (Magnusson and Redekopp, 1992). Competence included generic skills such as résumé writing, and also context specific ones such as the skills needed to do a particular new job, as well as self-appraisal. Self-management focused on self-monitoring, goal setting, self-evaluation, and self-reward (Magnusson & Redekopp). Self-management included the ability to develop strategies to act on the environment, to mold it to one's needs.

Self-management as a concept has similarities to theories of primary and secondary control in the coping literature. Primary-control concerns acting on the environment in order to achieve sought outcomes. Secondary-control emphasises acting on the self to manage emotions and attitudes (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). At the individual level the correct mix of control strategies seems likely to depend on circumstances particular to the client. Counselors can help select strategies by encouraging realistic appraisals of opportunities to change their environment, and also to change themselves (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). These two strategies should occur simultaneously and complement each other.

Control strategies can be taught through cognitive exercises (secondary control) and experimentation and action in the world (primary control). Strategies to manage self and the environment can be taught through lessons in basic communication, assertiveness, and self-esteem (Magnusson & Redekopp, 1992). For example, a counselor might work with a client to dispute erroneous and harmful self-beliefs (secondary control) and at the same time take rewarding, confidence building steps such as linking with new social networks or role models (primary control which in turn builds secondary control) (Bandura, 1977).

Salience was the third element in Magnusson and Redekopp's (1992) analysis of adaptability. It had two elements: structural and contextual. Structural salience related to belief structures, values systems, interest patterns and personal characteristics that were generally stable over time. Contextual salience was a "function of individuals' perceptions of their immediate circumstances" (p.138, Magnusson & Redekopp, 1992). An example is a person taking any job in order to pay the bills. Salience can be addressed through standard interest inventories and discussion of narrative and emotion. Narrative, or the stories of people's lives, reveals

the underlying meanings attached to events and issues, and how different strands fit together. The intensity of emotion indicates the importance of issues. Its nature indicates how people classify stimuli as good or bad, and how they subsequently process it (Ford & Ford, 1987). Counselors can ask clients what their immediate emotional reaction is to events, and then explore how it affects their subsequent approach to the issue. Events can be reframed and alternative approaches explored.

Integrating the three components of competence, self-management, and salience into a career transition program helps gauge and reduce the likelihood of a career transitioner gaining technical competence but failing to develop self-management strategies. It should also aid the pursuit of long-term goals and manage the interpersonal nature of new tasks or jobs. A failure to consider salience creates risks that people will attempt to raise their competence by investing in training but lose interest over time (Magnusson & Redekopp, 1992).

Emphases on the Future

Savickas (1997) proposed that planful attitudes, self and environmental exploration, and informed decision making provide a counseling framework based on developing adaptability. Savickas recommends that counselors could help:

When evaluating individual readiness to adapt, counsellors and researchers could assess the processes of adaptability and their developmental course in terms of planful foresight, exploration of the situation, relevant knowledge about self and situation, and decisional skill (p. 254).

The key to the above is planfulness, which is cognition about future events. Possible selves-based counseling is well suited to foster planfulness because it elicits a long-term perspective, aids development of the self-concept, provides information on relationships between the self and the outer world, and emphasizes the future rather than the past. Possible selves are also congruent with Magnusson and Redekopp's (1992) dimensions of adaptability. They act as a bridging construct between individual differences, self, context, and personal development that is easier to operationalize and work with than adaptability itself or related constructs about the self such as "innate potential" or "self-actualization" (Mittleman, 1991; Savickas, 1997).

Possible selves are "schematic cognitive representations of what people believe they may become, are hopeful of becoming or are fearful of becoming." (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Thus they are the images,

senses, and thoughts of a person's self in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves capture both hopes and fears and they fit Savickas (1997) framework for counseling which encourages a planful approach to life through enhanced self-knowledge.

Planful Foresight

Possible selves provide highly personalized vivid self-representations that are ideal as higher level goals (such as a free lance consultant with lots of time for family) to maintain motivation, and to develop more immediate goals (such as organize a brochure). Furthermore, as they include all aspects of life domains such as parent, worker, or leisurite they provide a richer and more diverse sense of self for individuals to draw on in times of transition. For example, volunteering can improve coping during a transition, provide new skills and networks, and can compensate for work situations that are failing to meet developmental and social needs.

Counselors can explore possible selves related to leisure, work, and other life roles as a means of encouraging a diverse adaptable future self (Niedenthal, Setturlund, & Wherry, 1992). Such diverse higher level selves encourage self-regulation by encouraging effective goal monitoring and adjustment (Winell, 1987). They do not just focus on the controlling nature of goals commonly referred to in the goal setting literature and which can lower performance in learning situations (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989).

Exploration of the Situation

Counselors and clients can gauge the usefulness of possible selves and use them as highly personalised distal goals to foster exploration. As possible selves are constructed from learning experiences, socio-cultural context, and media images they reflect a client's interpretation of the environment (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Counselors can use possible selves to explore underlying beliefs based on past experience that may be limiting their exploration and development. Asking clients the narrative or story of how their possible self came to be important reveals underlying world and self-beliefs that can then be altered or developed through encouragement or exploration

Relevant Knowledge of Self and Situation

Where possible selves are well-developed in a particular domain they comprise a person's identity, (e.g. wife, lawyer, mother, golfer etc.). Those individuals maintaining a possible self in a particular domain are likely to have well-developed schema for processing information that is

closely tied to their central or working self-concept. Thus they are likely to be better at noticing, attending to, and processing stimuli relevant to that self or schema. If the possible self is positive they are also likely to be less susceptible to setbacks because of self-protective mechanisms in cognitive processes and because of the salience of a relevant positive future self (Cross & Markus, 1991). Counselors can identify areas in which the person has well developed selves that may be effective in guiding action, and areas where selves may be undeveloped/ineffective.

By keeping clients focused on their possible selves, stimuli that were previously unnoticed or perceived in another way will be attended to in light of the possible positive attainment of the desired self. Newspaper advertisements previously missed will be seen, mentions of work will be heard, and leisure options previously over looked will be identified. Counselors can develop possible selves through a process of elaboration by encouraging clients to discuss them orally, in writing, or other media.

Decisional Skill

Possible selves provide insight into what may be erroneous foreclosure of future possibilities. They also have a direct effect on performance in decision making and in decision implementation. Poor performance is not only the result of a deficit in skills, but also doubts, negative expectations, low perceived control, pessimism, and low self-efficacy (Markus & Ruvolo, 1990). Thus possible selves counseling provides a means of both diagnosing and treating efficacy problems that may be undermining decisional skills.

Counselors can ask clients their hoped and feared selves across a range of life domains, and ask them the likelihood of these selves occurring. Efficacy beliefs can then be worked through the encouragement of exploratory action, modelling, and or cognitive behaviour treatments (Bandura, 1977). The mere imagining of oneself being successful in the future may enhance performance in the present (Markus & Ruvolo, 1990). Thus counseling clients to elaborate their selves through writing, discussion or other media can raise performance as well as motivation.

Summary and Conclusion

The psychology of well-being and of adaptability have considerable potential to foster career happiness. Possible selves theory points to some practical steps that counselors can take in guiding clients:

- *Identification of possible selves.* Such selves should include all life domains, hopes, fears and expectancies and also what is most

important. Counselors should work with their clients to identify their possible selves.

- Build a long-term future-focused perspective with diverse selves as vivid, personalised goals: Counselors can work with their clients to take a long-term perspective as a way of building decisional skill and adaptability. Recognition of moments of flow through narrative exercises, for example, can be used to alter possible self-concepts by building aspirations and efficacy beliefs, and diversifying self-beliefs. Volunteering and other exploratory behaviour can be used to develop schema or the self-structure that can increase choice and coping skills during a career transition or search for career happiness. Through guided discussion of these experiences in counseling, new possible selves can be developed.
- Encourage motivation and self-regulation: Possible selves can be elaborated through discussion and expression to enhance their motivational effectiveness as distal highly vivid and personal self-representations. More proximal goals can then be developed as sub goals beneath the possible selves. Clients can be taught adaptable self-regulation through encouragement toward a combination of diverse but highly salient goals, high efficacy expectations, effective monitoring and goal adjustment. A counselor might work with a client to develop such goals that can subsequently be reviewed in later sessions with careful attention paid to the client's own evaluation of progress, self-efficacy, and necessary adjustment.

Adaptability, well-being psychology and possible selves interrelate. In counseling they can contribute to career happiness through common themes of future focus, long-term outcomes, and relationships between the self and the outside world.

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About the Authors:

Geoff Plimmer is a doctoral student at Victoria University at Wellington, New Zealand, developing a computerised career guidance tool based on the possible selves construct for adult career development. His research interests are moving toward improving access to guidance with ethical and effective internet based applications. Geoff also works as a consultant policy analyst, evaluator, and human resource consultant. Inquiries regarding this article can be directed to geoffrey.plimmer@vuw.ac.nz. His address is 26 Creswick Tce., Northland, Wellington, NZ. Tel: 64-04-475854 or Fax: 64-04-4758273.

Mike Smith is a faculty member at Victoria University of Wellington. He has interests in industrial and organisational psychology in general but particularly in selection, human factors and job analysis. He can be contacted at Mike.Smith@vuw.ac.nz.

Michael Duggan is a Victoria University doctoral student researching cost-benefit analyses of human resource activities. Michael also works as a recruitment and selection consultant. He has a keen interest in statistics, psychometrics, and the financial impact of human resource practises such as workplace counselling. His e-mail is michael.duggan@vuw.ac.nz.

Paul Englert is a doctoral student whose work focuses on the application of possible selves to assisting young job seekers. Paul's research interests are mainly in the area of unemployment. He has completed a range of applied research in the unemployment field from the development of profiling tools to the design of feedback frameworks for the unemployed. Paul is also a Director of OPRA Ltd a firm specializing in the provision of applied research solutions for organizations. He is contactable at paul.englert@opra.co.nz.