



The Cultural Preparedness Approach to Working with Career Beliefs

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Abstract

The Indian workforce is strongly influenced by the labour market which today offers job opportunities that are unprecedented in scale and variety. Beliefs and notions play a significant role in choice of educational pathways and careers. This paper presents the construct of the cultural preparedness as a framework within which to develop and offer career guidance services that are culture resonant and that keep the personhood of the individual at the centre of the career decision-making process. A feature of culture preparedness is career beliefs, which are strongly held convictions about the process of career choice or about the world of work. Types of career beliefs and the impact they have on career decision-making are discussed in the paper, taking the position that healthy career development is rooted in the dynamic interaction between an individual's personal potentials and the offerings of the labour market. Based on these theoretical concepts, this paper presents two career counselling techniques that could be used to help the career chooser and the family become aware of career beliefs that could hinder the flowering of personal potentials.

Keywords: cultural preparedness, social cognitions, career beliefs, career beliefs diary, adolescents

Introduction

This paper begins with two anecdotes from a research project focused on understanding orientations to work, livelihood and career, amongst high school students from a wide range of socioeconomic status groups. Just before the project began in a high school that catered to boys from disadvantaged homes, a group of boys came up to the researcher. With a glint of mischief in their eyes they asked the researcher what he was doing in their school. The researcher explained that this was a research project that was aimed at understanding how young people make career decisions and prepare for the future. The group burst out laughing! The researcher asked them why they were laughing. "Because you have come to *our* school," one of them said. "You must go to schools where the rich kids study. They're the ones who *want* to study." The researcher asked them what their plans were. "I can tell you," one of them said quite confidently. He went on to say that his father had already planned that he would begin working as soon as he finished school in a pavement shop that fixed bicycle punctures. "All this planning and so forth is only for those who can afford to be unemployed. I will get about Rs. 100 a day. That's something. Anyway it's better than

spending more money." The researcher asked him what he would do for the rest of his life. "Ah... who knows," the boy replied, "Fate will decide."

Consider the response of another batch of students who differed from the group described above only in terms of their socioeconomic status: this was a group from more privileged homes. "We are waiting eagerly for your workshop," one of the boys said. "Why?" asked the researcher. "Because it will help us with our career development," came the prompt reply. "Have any of you thought about your careers?" asked the researcher. "I have," said one. "I am going to become a Management Consultant. It is the way to make easy money. All I have to do is get to the USA and do my MBA in Harvard. And then I can join a consultancy firm like McKinsey."

What a contrast between the two groups! One group was sceptical of the value of education and career guidance. The other believed that education was the key to success and prosperity. One group had an immediate and short-term view of career development while the other had a long-term view and was planning nearly 10 years ahead!

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Over the last decade or so, India has achieved the distinction of being one of the world's fastest growing economies. This has been stimulated by economic reforms and policies that have allowed the forces of globalisation to move the country into the arena of the free market. A consequence of economic expansion is a broadening of the range of job possibilities that are available. The labour market in India is clamouring for "labour" and workers too are responding with vigour. A closer examination of this phenomenon reveals however that more often than not, it is the opportunity that influences career choice, rather than the individual's own interests and talents. In effect we are seeing a labour market centric decision-making process, rather than a person-centred approach to the world of work. It is against this background that the relevance of career counselling in India must be understood. A successful career guidance programme would contribute to optimising the engagement of the individual with the labour market such that personal potentials are realised in the course of discharging work roles and duties. Yet, the career services could remain ineffective if they do not connect with local realities. If theories of career development and the interventions that emerge from these theories are to be meaningful, they must be attuned to the ways of thinking and living that compose the fabric of a society (Arulmani, 2006).

The Cultural Preparedness Approach to Career Counselling

An individual's engagement with life is strongly influenced by the cultural framework within which he or she has grown up. The learning that occurs between an individual and his or her culture is not only the result of interactions with present members of that culture but is drawn from a deep repository of experience that has accumulated and grown over the ages (Arulmani, 2009). The cultural preparedness approach argues that career development occurs under the influence of a wide range of factors. "Family and parents, social practices, religious persuasion, economic climate, political orientations, all come together to create a certain environment within which attitudes and opinions are formed about different careers" (Arulmani, 2010, p. 23).

Social Cognitions and Career Beliefs

Social cognitions are patterns of thinking that have become habitual across members of

a social group (Bandura, 1989). "Views and sentiments, opinions and convictions, ideas and notions could cohere and create mindsets that influence people's conception of career. We use the term career beliefs to refer to this intricate network of cognitions about career decision-making and career planning" (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004, p. 46). It is important to note that, these configurations of beliefs may not only be internalised within the minds of single individuals but may also characterise the group's habitual ways of thinking and may be transferred to the young in that community through a reciprocal process of social learning. Our research has repeatedly demonstrated that career beliefs have a significant impact upon the manner in which a career aspirant deals with career development tasks and that the long-term effects of career guidance maybe negligible if career beliefs are left unaddressed (e.g., Arulmani, 2011; Arulmani & Abdulla, 2007).

Types of Career Beliefs

Our research has also shown that the content of career beliefs can be thematically classified (Arulmani, 2008; Arulmani & Bakshi, 2012). Some of the most common career belief themes we have identified have emerged during the course of our investigations in different cultural contexts. These include beliefs about persistence, proficiency, disadvantage, conformity, and prestige. *Persistence beliefs* refer to the individual's belief in the value of facing and attempting to overcome difficulties and hurdles that punctuate progress toward a career goal that includes persisting in education—sticking on, despite setbacks in achieving educational goals. These beliefs reflect a sense of determination and tenacity to achieve positive prospects. *Proficiency beliefs* describe the individual's recognition of the importance of acquiring formal qualifications to enhance personal proficiency for an occupation before entering the world of work. These beliefs reflect notions of adequacy or inadequacy in regard to education, employment and career achievements. The content of beliefs related to *disadvantage* reflects the individual's preoccupation with his or her socioeconomic status. It also shows the individual's sense of control over his or her life situation and the confidence the person has to direct the course of his or her life. *Conformity* beliefs refer to the manner in which the person engages with the unwritten norms that shape the career preparation behaviour of a community in a certain way. The content of these beliefs

would reveal the career chooser's propensity to comply with or fit into the social mould. Career choices could be significantly influenced by *prestige* beliefs. These beliefs reflect mindsets that place occupations on a hierarchy of prestige, restricting career preferences to what is given high social standing by the community of which the career chooser is a part. Career beliefs can also affect personal beliefs of self-efficacy for specific careers as illustrated in the Table 1.

Techniques to Work with Career Beliefs

Career beliefs could lead to systematic biases in the interpretation of experiences which in turn could affect career decision-making. Career beliefs could become automatic and the person could be unaware of their influences. It has also been found that beliefs shared by the individuals of a community may cohere into a group behaviour pattern (e.g., Arulmani & Abdulla, 2007). In other words a group mindset could characterise a community as a whole. The effectiveness of career counselling would be higher when underlying beliefs that influence the individual's career choice making process are understood. Given below are suggestions for two simple methods that could help a counsellor work with career beliefs.

The Career Beliefs Diary

This is a technique to help clients recognise career beliefs that are influencing their thinking and the potential outcome of such thinking patterns. The client is given an outline that (s)he is to use to record thoughts (s)he has when dealing with career preparation tasks, the emotions that arise in response to these thoughts, and the possible consequences of these thoughts and emotions. Over a period of time, a pattern of thoughts and emotions would become clear in the diary. This would further point to career beliefs that are prevailing in the diary keeper's mind and the possible effect they have on his or her career preparation. A case example is given below:

A 17-year-old student who was completing higher secondary education in about 3 months requested to be seen individually, after she had participated in group career counselling workshops held routinely for her class. During the first session she indicated that although a number of friends, teachers and parents suggested that she takes

up careers in the field of Design, she was still very confused. She was asked to start a Career Beliefs Diary. Given in Table 1 is an extract of a few entries from her diary. The target would be to help the career chooser understand the manner in which thoughts can become habits and how our thoughts can be a filter through which we interpret and give meaning to events. The content of a career beliefs diary could be used to help the individual gain deeper insights and lay the foundations for effective and fruitful career decision-making.

The Vignette Technique

What are vignettes? Vignettes are meticulously composed verbal pictures, drawn from the everyday experiences of a client group (Wilson, 1998). They simulate actual occurrences and circumstances and are constructed with the objective of identifying attitudes and extracting views, ideas and beliefs. Vignettes place abstract impressions within a frame of reference to which the reader is well accustomed in order to facilitate easy comprehension and identification. The use of vignettes has been found to be valuable in situations where the re-creation of real life events is difficult and cumbersome (Wilson, 1998). Our use of vignettes has shown that they are effective in helping a career chooser develop deeper insights into the manner in which career decision-making is being influenced. Our experience has also shown that vignettes offer a certain 'distance' from one's personal opinions and hence provide an opportunity to move beyond socially acceptable responses and discussions (Arulmani, 2010).

Developing vignettes to address career beliefs. A key to constructing effective vignettes is that their content is distilled from the common and everyday experiences of the group with which the vignettes are going to be used. Given below are suggestions on how vignettes could be constructed.

Step 1: Identify common statements.

Career beliefs are often embedded in language, that is, the sentences and phrases commonly used by a group of people when they refer to career choices and career development. "Without science, you have no chance", "Arts has no future", "Polytechnic is only for those who can't afford", "Girls can study, but their first responsibility is family", are examples of sentences commonly used by

Table 1. Extracts from a Career Beliefs Diary

Date	Activity	Thought	Emotion	Action
14 th Jan 2010	Read about entrance examination to design school.	Oh God! I have to prepare a portfolio.	My work is not good to be shown to others.	Stopped thinking about design as a career.
15 th Jan 2010	Completed Art Class record books for internal assessment.	I will not get good marks.	Felt so scared that I will fail.	Didn't submit the book to teacher.
16 th Jan 2010	Have to go to principal for certificate to submit to design school.	He will say he won't give a certificate.	Everyone says I'm good, but I know I'm not...it's no use.	Postponed going to principal.

middle class Indian high school students and their parents (and in many cases teachers as well) when matters related to career choice are discussed. These statements reflect career belief patterns and clearly reveal the social cognitive factors which underlie career decision making. Drawing such phrases, idioms and terms into a career counselling interaction is pivotal to the cultural preparedness approach. The first step toward developing career belief vignettes is to collect such commonly used phrases and sentences that reflect ideas and notions related to career development.

Step 2: Look for patterns in these statements. Career beliefs may be expressed in different ways by different groups, but they may all link to a common career belief theme. Having collected a large number of sentences and phrases the next step is to identify patterns and common threads in a set of frequently used statements. At this stage in the vignette technique, the objective is to look for themes into which the statements can be classified. The career belief themes described under types of career beliefs in the section above could be used as a structure within which to examine statements.

Step 3: Use statements to create vignettes. The next step is to compose vignettes that capture the career belief content of the collected statements. Table 2 provides an example that shows the conversion of a collection of statements into a vignette that reflect Proficiency beliefs.

Vignettes offer a contextualised link to the client's career beliefs. Vignettes, such as

the example in Table 2, are useful during career development programmes to initiate focussed discussions and create a platform upon which career choosers could think about and become more aware of the social cognitive influences on their career decision-making.

Dealing with Career Beliefs

Career beliefs are unreasoned persuasions. They may or may not be factual. They may or may not be facilitative of the career preparation process. The career beliefs diary illustrates a method that could be used to help career choosers learn about their career beliefs and become aware of the impact that such cognitions could have. The vignette technique gives the counsellor a method that could be used to draw upon everyday experiences to develop vignettes and stories with a broader scope that a client group could consider more deeply.

Once a career belief has been recognised, client(s) and counsellor could together explore the belief and the manner in which it influences career development. These explorations would be even more meaningful if the counsellor collates data and specific information to support discussions related to career beliefs with clients. Further, the counsellor's prior understanding of career beliefs could inform the development of the career counselling intervention that would be most relevant to a particular group. Examples of complete interventions developed on the basis of a deep understanding of social cognitive environments are the Yes Programme for Employment Skills Development developed in the Republic of

Table 2. Developing a Proficiency-Belief Vignette from Statements.

Statements Commonly Used by Adolescents and Parents	Vignette
<p>Without science, you have no chance.</p> <p>Arts has no future.</p> <p>Polytechnic is only for those who can't afford.</p> <p>If you are intelligent and get high marks you must take science. The next level is commerce. If you get very low marks you take arts.</p> <p>Engineering is a must for a successful career.</p>	<p>Agnel is in class 10 and he has been studying hard. He is very good with numbers. He maintains the class accounts and also helps his mother maintain the home accounts. He is really interested in business and wants to study finance. However, it is best he takes up science for his higher secondary and studies engineering. This will make his career safe. After that he can always take up a post graduate course in finance or accounts if he wants.</p>

Maldives (Arulmani & Abdulla, 2007) and the Jiva Approach to Career Development developed for the Indian context (Arulmani, 2011).

Discussion and Conclusion

Career counselling that draws upon career beliefs could help the career chooser become more aware of how career choices are often obstructed by social cognitions of which he or she has no awareness. A career counselling aim here would be to draw the individual's attention to the importance of personal interests, preferences, talents and aptitudes, and how they, rather than unreasoned career beliefs, can play a defining role in career decision-making. It is important to note that the intention of such an exercise is not to oppose the client. Nor is it meant to point the client toward "healthier" ways of thinking. Instead, the objective is to bring into sharper awareness of the career chooser, the impact that career beliefs could have on opportunities and life chances (Arulmani, 2010).

A final point to keep in mind is that career beliefs are social cognitions. This implies that it is not only the individual's mind and ways of thinking that are in operation. Career beliefs are transmitted across generations. Drawing the family into the counselling process and highlighting the impact of career beliefs on career development is important, particularly in collectivistic societies (Arulmani, 2010). A further, critical point to be considered is the fact that career beliefs are not located only around the client and his or her community. The counsellor too views life from within a specific social-cognitive perspective. It is eminently possible that the counsellor's social cognitions are imposed on the client and his or her family. When this happens career counselling merely perpetuates another set of career beliefs (Arulmani, 2010). The quality of cultural preparedness for career development could differ from one culture to another. The cultural preparedness approach gives a careers programme a uniqueness that sharpens its contextual relevance. It is this relevance that would contribute to the durability of its outcomes.

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