Qualitative Career Assessment:
Developing the My System of Career Influences Reflection Activity

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Abstract

The present paper reports on the development of a qualitative career assessment activity, specifically the My System of Career Influences (MSCI) Reflection Activity. The paper describes the process of development and the testing of the instrument. The testing was conducted in two stages with adults and adolescents. Findings from Stage 1 indicate that the MSCI (Pilot version) is a useful instrument that warrants separate versions for adults and adolescents. Findings from Stage 2 indicate that the MSCI (Adolescent version) is a useful instrument that is appropriate for use with adolescents. Suggestions for future refinement and testing of the MSCI are presented.

Qualitative career assessment is perhaps best described as "informal forms of assessment" (Okocha, 1998, p. 151). As such it provides an opportunity for client and counselor interaction that is flexible and enables the telling of career stories (Savickas, 1993). Its reliance on open-ended, holistic, and non-statistical processes (Goldman, 1992) may enrich career counseling by placing emphasis on the counseling relationship within which clients and counselors work together to co-construct a story around a qualitative assessment activity. Thus the qualitative assessment process may be viewed as a collaborative rather than an expert driven process (Peavy, 1996).

Common forms of qualitative career assessment processes include card sorts (Stevens, 1997, 1998), genograms (Okiishi, 1987), timelines, life space mapping (Peavy, 1997), pattern identification (Amundson, 1998) and early recollections. Indeed, career counselors may develop their own qualitative assessment processes (Goldman, 1992) or personalize existing processes to suit the needs of their clients. Commercially available qualitative materials (e.g., Stevens, 1997, 1998) commonly include a description of the materials and how they may best be used as well as supplementary activities. More recently McMahon and Patton (2002) proposed guidelines for incorporating qualitative assessment processes into career counseling. Significantly, the role of the client as described in these guidelines is one of active participant rather than passive respondent.

Goldman (1992) suggests that the role of the counselor is also labor intensive as he/she must work with the client throughout the process in a collaborative and supportive role and debrief the assessment in order to elicit learning at the end of the process.

To date, qualitative career assessment has received little attention in the literature as evidenced by subsequent reviews of practice and theory in career counseling and development (e.g., Arbona, 2000; Flores et al., 2003; Luzzo & MacGregor, 2001; Whiston & Brecheisen, 2002; Young & Chen, 1999). This lack of attention to qualitative assessment has persisted despite calls for "assessment to keep pace with changes in the workforce and society (Subich, 1996, p. 227), the need to use "multiple assessment measures and multiple methods for gathering information" (Flores et al., p. 111), and cautions against the exclusive use of objectively derived data ((Subich & Billingsley, 1995). Further, questions about the cultural appropriateness of traditional assessments have been raised with the recommendation that other client information should be sought (Flores et al.; Subich & Billingsley).

Such comments are located in a broader discussion about the influence of the constructivist worldview on career development theory and practice and its possible relationship with the traditional positivist worldview (see Savickas, 1995). In this regard, Borgen (1995) advocates methodological pluralism and suggests that tools from both paradigms may be used synergistically. Such a view is consistent with calls to move beyond the traditional matching approach to one that promotes an interactive learning process between clients and counselors (Krumboltz & Coon, 1995).

The Systems Theory Framework (STF; Patton & McMahon, 1999) of career development is well positioned to enter such discussion. As a theoretical account of career development, the STF is positioned within the constructivist worldview, and thus takes into account broad based contextual influences as well as intrapersonal influences on individuals' career development. In addition, its application to the career development of women (Patton, 1997), Australian Aboriginal people (Sarra, 1997), Chinese students (Back, 1997), and persons with disabilities (Gillies & Knight, 2001) has been described. Further, its application to contextual issues such as rural location (Collett, 1997) and socio-economic disadvantage (Taylor, 1997) and to particular settings such as organizations (Dunn, 1997) and schools (Patton & McMahon, 1999) has also been described.

In their presentation of the STF, Patton and McMahon describe the sequential development of their framework from the intrapersonal system, through to its connection with the social system, the environmental/societal system, and the influences of past, present, future and chance. These authors propose that at a given point in time individuals may visually represent the constellation of influences connecting with their career situation. In this regard, the STF lends itself comfortably to use as a qualitative assessment tool, specifically the My Systems of Career Influences (MSCI) reflection activity. Thus, the MSCI was developed in response to calls for greater use of qualitative assessment, the complementary use of qualitative and quantitative assessment, the need for assessment tools that may be used across cultures, and the need for gathering contextual information.

This paper reports on the development and testing of the MSCI. The development of the MSCI was informed by suggestions proffered for the development of qualitative career assessment processes (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003). First, a description of

the MSCI will be provided, followed by an account of its development. Second, an overview of the testing process will be described. Findings and resultant refinements to the instrument will be presented. The final stage of development, while yet to be completed, will be outlined.

Description of the MSCI

The MSCI is a booklet of nine pages that guides participants through a reflection on their current career situation. Each page introduces a new phase in the process and provides participants with brief information, sequential instructions, examples and a place to respond. While the booklet may be self-guided, it is preferable that career counselors or teachers interact with clients throughout the process and provide support and clarification where necessary.

The MSCI has an intended client group of adolescents and adults. The cover (page 1) provides an introduction to the MSCI and space for participants to write their name, gender, date, school or organization, and year level. Page 2, titled My Present Career Situation, consists of five items inviting participants to reflect on their current career situation. Space is provided to write answers to each item. Essentially items seek information on topics such as life-roles, employment options (past, present and future), and previous career decisions.

Pages 3, 4, 5, and 6 facilitate the sequential building of the participant's system of influences. Each of these pages is similarly formatted and contains background information and a set of instructions. Participants are invited to select from examples and opportunity is provided to add or modify influences and to indicate the level of importance of the influences they identify.

Each of pages 3, 4, 5, and 6 accord with the development of the STF described by Patton and McMahon (1999). Page 3, titled Thinking About Who I Am, is based on the intrapersonal system of influences depicted in the STF. It invites participants to reflect on themselves in terms of intrapersonal influences such as interests, personality, gender, and culture. Page 4, titled Thinking About the People Around Me, is based on the social system of influences depicted in the STF. It invites participants to reflect on themselves in terms of interpersonal influences such as family, friends, and media. Page 5, titled Thinking About Society and Environment, is based on the environmental/societal system of influences depicted in the STF. It invites participants to reflect on themselves in terms of environmental/societal influences such as financial support, their local area, and public transport. Page 6, titled Thinking About My Past, Present, and Future, is also based on influences described in the STF. It invites participants to reflect on themselves in terms of influences related to past and present experiences and future anticipation such as lifestyle and personal goals.

Page 7, titled Representing My System of Career Influences, provides instructions for the completion of an MSCI diagram. An example is also provided. This page guides participants in using the information they recorded on previous pages to construct their MSCI diagram. Page 9, the tear-off back page titled My System of Career Influences, depicts one large circle in which participants draw their MSCI diagram. Page 8, titled Reflecting on My System of Career Influences, is a guided reflection on the participant's

MSCI diagram consisting of ten questions. Participants may work through these alone or with a counselor.

Development of the MSCI

To date, there has been little to guide the development of qualitative assessment (Niemeyer & Niemeyer, 1993). While the criteria for adequacy of assessment developed under the positivist worldview are “normative and statistical,” under the constructivist worldview, the criteria are “primarily interpretative and phenomenological” (Niemeyer & Niemeyer, 1993, p. 23). Thus “qualitative research should not be evaluated in terms of the canons of validity that have evolved for the assessment of quantitative research, since these have different epistemological priorities and commitments" (Richardson, 1996, pp. 191-192). However these different criteria do not suggest that there is not an ongoing need for rigor in development.

Despite these different criteria for adequacy, developers of qualitative career assessment processes may use concepts from both worldviews. In this regard, McMahon, Patton and Watson (2003) describe a rigorous process for the development and testing of qualitative assessment processes that reflects both worldviews. For example, the MSCI directly derived from the STF, the theory on which it is founded and in so doing demonstrates construct validity, a logical positivist construct. Further, content validity, another logical positivist construct, is demonstrated as two of the developers of the MSCI are also the authors of the STF, and all three authors are specialists in career development. Each stage of the process was subject to expert review. In addition face validity was assessed as developmental versions of the MSCI were trialled with a range of career development practitioners. However, the MSCI is also phenomenological in nature, a constructivist construct, as it facilitates the telling of a story by an individual and the elaboration of meaning and learning. The development of the MSCI will now be described according to the guidelines suggested by McMahon, Patton, and Watson (2003).

Ground the Assessment Process in Theory

The MSCI is grounded broadly in constructivist theory and specifically in the Systems Theory Framework of career development (Patton & McMahon, 1999). The steps of the MSCI mirror the sequential building of the STF as described by Patton and McMahon. Consistent with the constructs of its theoretical origin in systems theory, the MSCI promotes a holistic approach that illustrates the recursive nature of a broad range of influences on the individual’s career where patterns and themes may be identified and from which a story may be told.

Test the Career Assessment Process

As with the development of standardized psychological tests and inventories, the items for the MSCI were developed, tested on different samples, and revised according to the findings of the testing. Essentially, the testing and refinement process has moved through two stages as described below. While the two completed stages have focused on the instrument itself, the third stage will focus on embedding the MSCI into a more comprehensive facilitated reflection process that will be guided by a facilitator’s manual. At the time of writing, preparation for the third stage of testing is underway.

Ensure that the Process can be Completed in a Reasonable Time Frame

In the development of the MSCI, the authors were conscious of the time pressures of single session counseling and school based career education interventions. While the MSCI may be completed in a 30 minute session, a degree of flexibility is also possible. For example, it is possible for participants to complete discrete phases of the MSCI in their own time or to return to it several times. Further, participants could revisit their MSCI over time and modify its content according to changes in their lives or new insights or awareness. Teachers may embed the MSCI into a series of lessons or counselors could incorporate it into several counseling sessions.

Design a Process that Fosters Holism

In keeping with its theoretical origins, the MSCI encourages participants to reflect on their intrapersonal system of influences, their social system, their environmental/societal system and the influence of time - past, present, and future. While each of these may be viewed discretely, the completion of the MSCI diagram enables clients to portray a holistic picture of these influences on their career situation. This facilitates the telling of a rich and holistic story in which a range of themes, patterns, characters, plots, and settings may be uncovered and their connection with the participant explored.

Write the Instructions for the Client

Consistent with the focus on the individual promoted by both constructivism and the STF, the instructions in the MSCI are client focused. As with other qualitative assessment instruments (e.g., Stevens, 1997, 1998; Viljamaa, 1998) instructions are personalized using phrases such as “you may like” and “your thoughts”. Individuals are recognized as being the ‘experts’ in their particular career situations.

Write Readable and Easily Understood Instructions

In addition to being personalized, the instructions are written in such a way that the MSCI booklet could be self-guided. Each phase of the process provides easy to read background information followed by three clear steps and an example. In addition, the introduction and debriefing sections provide easily understood questions and space for clients to write responses. While the MSCI could be self-guided, the instructions also enable clients to be supported by a counselor or career education teacher in individual or group settings.

Sequence Logical, Simple, Small, Achievable Steps

The MSCI reflection process guides the participant through a series of sequential steps using a booklet of nine pages. Each page introduces a new concept and step-by-step instructions for its completion. Each page is both a step in a process and a process in itself. For example, page 4 guides reflection on the individual’s social system, a process in itself and a phase in the process of reflecting on the individual’s whole system of influences.

Provide a Focused and Flexible Process

The MSCI focuses on exploring the system of influences present in clients' career situations. While it is sequential and guided, it also enables clients to personalize their system of influences by selecting from, modifying, and adding to the examples provided.

Encourage Cooperative Involvement of Counselor and Client

The MSCI enables cooperation and collaboration between counselor and client. The booklet begins with a set of questions that could stimulate meaningful reflection on clients' career situations before beginning to develop their system of career influences diagram. These questions could be regarded as a warm-up to the MSCI activity. Throughout the activity, client and counselor could continue to interact. Following the completion of the MSCI activity, a set of questions is provided to elicit client learning through reflection on their MSCI. At the time of writing, a facilitator's manual is being prepared that will provide suggestions for a more comprehensive client/counselor collaboration process.

Include a Debriefing Process

Qualitative assessment processes are essentially experiential learning activities (Patton & McMahon, 1999). Kolb (1984) suggests that structured and thoughtful debriefing is essential in order to maximize learning from such activities. To this end, the debriefing structured into the MSCI takes two forms. The first, a reflective process where participants re-examine each of the MSCI phases, invites them to create their own MSCI diagram. The second, a guided reflection based on a series of questions focused on the MSCI diagram, encourages counselor and client to engage in a collaborative discussion about the meaning of the client's MSCI diagram and the resultant learning.

Testing the Process

The testing to this point has been conducted in a two stage cross-national process. Stage 1 of testing was based on the pilot version of the instrument (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2000) and Stage 2 was based on the adolescent version (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003), a refinement of the pilot version. Stage 1 was conducted in university settings in Australia and South Africa with groups of masters level students enrolled in career development courses. Stage 2 was conducted in two parts. Part A was also conducted in university settings in Australia and South Africa with groups of masters level students enrolled in career development courses. Part B was conducted in an individual setting with adolescents in South Africa. Each stage of the testing process will now be described and refinements of the MSCI elaborated.

Stage 1

Participants

The participants were students enrolled in Masters programs at a South African and an Australian university. All students were studying career development courses. The sample may be described as middle-class and English speaking. The South African sample consisted of 18 students and the Australian sample comprised 16 students.

Measure

The measure used in Stage 1 was the MSCI (pilot version; McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2000) that has been previously described.

Procedure

All students in the courses previously described were invited to complete the MSCI and participate in a focus group interview to discuss their experience and critique the instrument. All consented to do so. They were each provided with a copy of the MSCI to work through at their own pace. Following the completion of the MSCI, students participated in the focus group interview. The interview was guided by seven questions. One question invited comment on age appropriateness, language, and concepts contained in each section of the booklet. Four questions sought information on the time taken to complete the process, the instructions provided throughout the booklet, the structure of the booklet, and the potential usefulness of the process. A further two questions sought feedback on the My System of Career Influences diagram and the debriefing/reflection process. Participants were also invited to make additional comments. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data from each nation was analyzed separately by question. Predominant themes that emerged across national samples were identified and recorded with examples of each. The analyses were then compared across nations and cross-national themes identified. In addition, national differences were noted. Five themes were identified, specifically language, instructions, terminology and examples, developmental appropriateness, layout, and positive comments.

Findings

Stage 1 of the testing process revealed a positive response to the MSCI (pilot version) with most participants agreeing on its potential usefulness. For example, they commented that “it provides insight to the client and counselor”, “it provides context”, and that it would be a “good and useful tool” that could be used “as an in-process and pre-process counseling tool”. In addition, their critique provided suggestions for refinements of the MSCI booklet. Responses under each of the main themes will now be presented.

Language. In general, the most recorded suggestion related to the “level of sophistication” of the language used and whether it was appropriate for secondary school students.

Instructions, terminology and examples. Related to this were suggestions that participants needed a greater level of guidance in terms of more examples, specific instructions, and clarification of some examples.

Developmental appropriateness. In essence participants suggested that different versions of the MSCI were needed for different developmental levels, specifically one version for adolescents and another for adults. In addition, participants suggested that adolescents would need more preparation for working through the document.

Layout. Participants suggested that more space was needed for answers, and that some instructions needed further clarification through the use of bullet points rather than paragraphs.

Positive comments. Both national groups responded well to the drawing of the MSCI diagram and the debriefing activity. In particular they commented that the questions were clear and that the debriefing activity "brought everything together" and was "the most potent section of the instrument".

Recommendations

In essence the findings recommended that

- two versions of the MSCI be developed, specifically one version for adults and another for adolescents;
- the structure of the MSCI be retained;
- instructions be clarified and simplified; and
- more space be provided for answers.

Stage 2

Participants

Stage 2 of the testing was conducted in two parts, the first with an adult sample, and the second with an adolescent sample. The adult sample consisted of students enrolled in Masters programs at a South African and an Australian university, most of whom work with adolescents. All students were studying career development courses. The sample may be described as middle-class and English speaking. The South African sample comprised 14 students and the Australian sample comprised 21 students. The adolescent sample comprised 16 English speaking students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds aged between 13 and 17 years with a mean age of 14.6 years. The sample comprised 6 males and 10 females. Of the sample, seven have formally assessed learning disabilities.

Measure

The measure used in Stage 2 was the MSCI (adolescent version, McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003). While the description of the instrument provided earlier in this paper remains the same, changes were made throughout the instrument in accordance with the recommendations of Stage 1. Specifically, the layout, language and instructions were modified to suit the adolescent age group. Two questions were added to Page 2 seeking information both on strategies and approaches used in previous career decision-making and on who had helped or provided advice in previous career decisions. Space was provided to write answers to each item. The major modification was to the layout of Pages 3 to 6. In the MSCI (pilot version, McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2000), following a short background description, the pages were divided into two halves, the top half providing examples and the bottom half a space for participants to respond. In the revised MSCI (adolescent version, McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003), the pages are not divided. Rather, the examples and space for participants' responses are contained in one larger diagram; above the diagram on each page is a set of three instructions that are consistent on each page.

Procedure

The procedure with the adult sample in Stage 2 was consistent with that described in Stage 1. With the adolescent sample, the testing was conducted in two phases (Dullabh, 2004). Phase 1 involved four of the students and was conducted using the process described in Stage 1. Four facilitators were present to assist the participants where necessary. On the basis of feedback from the facilitators, an introductory process was designed to introduce the participants to the concepts of systems thinking found in the MSCI. Specifically, the process assisted participants to develop awareness of themselves as unique individuals who interact with others and live in a society. In addition, the facilitators decided to work individually with the participants. In Phase 2, facilitators worked with individual participants on the introductory process prior to completing the MSCI. For each phase, data was gathered by means of a focus group interview with the facilitators, and the completed MSCI booklets and diagrams.

Data Analysis

With the adult sample, data from each nation was analyzed separately by question. First the transcripts were read to check the applicability of the themes from Stage 1, specifically language, instructions, terminology and examples, developmental appropriateness, layout, and positive comments. All themes applied and an additional theme, learning, was identified. Examples were identified under each of the predominant themes. In addition, national differences were noted.

With the adolescent sample, data was analyzed according to the themes identified with the adult sample. In addition, facilitators' observations of administration of the MSCI were recorded and comparisons of the phase one and phase two booklets were noted.

Findings

The findings related to the adult sample will be presented first. As with Stage 1, the findings revealed a positive response to the MSCI (adolescent version) with most participants agreeing on its potential usefulness. For example, they commented that it is "a wonderful idea and a valuable exercise", "practical and useful", "good as a teaching and counseling tool as it provides an understanding before making career choices" and that it is a "good starting block for self-discovery in that you are faced with all the dynamics facing your career choice".

Language. Most of the participants indicated that the language was appropriate and easy to understand. A small number of participants made suggestions of words that they believed would be more appropriate for adolescents such as replacing the word "confirmed" in the question "what has been confirmed for you".

Instructions, terminology, and examples. Most participants found that the MSCI was user friendly and that it contained "very clear step by step instructions" that are "understandable". Most liked the use of examples throughout the booklet and found them helpful. Several participants commented on the need to clarify that the tear-off back page is where participants draw their System of Career Influences diagram. A further set of suggestions related to the need for a "self-directed teacher book of what to say and background information", "facilitator to draw out what it is about", and "guide book to accompany facilitator".

A difference between the Australian and South African responses related to race and ethnicity. While they are addressed in the MSCI at a personal level on Page 3, several South African participants indicated that they should also be addressed at the broader societal level on Page 5.

Developmental appropriateness. Most participants agreed that the MSCI (adolescent version) was age appropriate in terms of language, examples, and appropriate instructions. Some suggested that it would be useful "in helping teenagers understand their career influences". One suggested that it may be a complex tool for lower secondary school level students and another suggested that students would need a facilitator.

Layout. The layout of the MSCI received more feedback than any other theme. This emanated from its presentation as a prototype that has not yet been professionally designed. Comments related to line spacing, the size of circle and oval shapes, font size, lack of color, and placement of instructions and examples. Further, several comments were made about the possible use of shading to illustrate the sequencing of the activity.

Positive comments. Most participants made positive comments about the MSCI. In particular, its structure, comprehensiveness, use of examples, sequential instructions, ease of use, helpfulness, and interest level prompted positive comments.

Learning. The potential of the MSCI as a career development learning tool was reflected in the comments of many participants. For example, they commented that it "stimulates thinking", "brought everything together", "provides insight into where a person's decisions are coming from", "would be helpful for those with career indecision" and "guides the learner to understand himself and the influences on career development better". In relation to adolescents, they suggested that the MSCI would be "useful in fostering self-awareness in adolescents", "good as a teaching and counseling tool as it provides understanding before making career choices", and "practical and useful as it stimulates thinking".

The findings related to the adolescent sample in phase one indicated the participants had difficulty with the language and instructions and relating to the concept of career and thinking systemically (Dullabh, 2004). In addition, they tended to use examples provided in the booklet as their own. They enjoyed and were able to complete the MSCI diagram. On the basis of these findings, the measure and process were adjusted for phase two. Specifically, an introductory non-career related process was developed to introduce the concepts of systemic thinking. In addition, some wording was changed on the MSCI and all examples were removed. The findings related to the adolescent sample in phase two revealed that the introductory process was well received by the participants and that they were better prepared for the MSCI. In all cases, participants completed the MSCI faster and more comprehensively.

Recommendations

In essence, the findings of the current study suggest that the MSCI is ready for further testing on adolescents subject to:

- further refinement of language and wording;
- professional layout; and
- the development of a facilitator's manual.

Further, findings indicate that the facilitator's manual should contain instructions for its administration, and examples of a process into which the MSCI could be embedded.

Discussion

The findings in both stages of testing have clearly indicated that the MSCI is a valuable qualitative assessment instrument that will facilitate career development learning. Given the nature of the adolescent sample, the findings related to the MSCI (adolescent version) are particularly encouraging. In general, participants have enjoyed the process of drawing their MSCI diagram and have found it a valuable learning experience.

At a practical level, the findings from the adolescent testing accorded with the recommendations of the adult sample. Specifically, the need for the MSCI to be embedded in a facilitated process was borne out by the adolescent testing. Further, preliminary testing of such a process with adolescents indicated that it benefited participants by generating a richer and more comprehensive learning experience.

Testing to date has intentionally focused on the development of the instrument itself and there has been limited testing of the instrument with adolescents. Findings indicate that the MSCI (Adolescent version) is an appropriate tool to use with adolescents. Subject to implementation of the Stage 2 recommendations, future testing will be conducted with adolescents in individual and group settings. In addition, future testing will relate to both the instrument and a facilitated process guided by an instructor's manual.

The development of qualitative assessment instruments has seldom been described, yet such a process is quite common in the development of quantitative assessment instruments. As evidenced in this paper, the development and testing of qualitative assessment activities may be a rigorous process. The testing process, while time consuming, has guided refinement of the instrument to the point where it may now be tested on a larger scale with adolescents. Further, the emphasis of the next stage of testing will shift to the process in which the MSCI is embedded. The researchers would suggest that the two-step testing process employed in the present research, first testing the instrument and second the administration process, is appropriate and a strength of the present research. Feedback from the testing suggests that the MSCI is a theoretically grounded, client oriented, holistic, sequential, and meaningful learning experience, all of which accord with the guidelines suggested by McMahon, Patton and Watson (2003).

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