The Culture-Infused Counselling Model

Dr Nancy Arthur and Dr Sandra Collins wrote a great article on multicultural counselling for Canada’s Careering magazine, and have kindly allowed us to share.

The seeds for our model of Culture-Infused Career Counselling (CICC) were sown at high altitude. We were both travelling to a national conference on career development in Ottawa. During a conversation on the airplane, we discussed the lack of Canadian content in models of multicultural counselling and some of the unique aspects of the Canadian context. During that flight we decided that we wanted to make a contribution to the literature on multicultural counselling. After working with our original model of Culture-Infused Counselling for a few years, we have revised it for career counselling.

In the CICC model, we emphasise reflective practice, challenging career-practitioners to consider potential cultural influences in three domains:

(a) self-awareness about personal cultural identity,
(b) awareness about the cultures of our clients, and,
(c) awareness of how culture influences the working alliance between practitioners and clients.

Our intention in developing CICC was not to develop a new theory; rather to provide a model from which career practitioners could reflect on the cultural validity of their approaches. We wanted to recognize the importance of a focus on both clients and practitioners in the model.

Whereas many previous models have placed the emphasis on the culture of clients, we invite readers to consider that practitioners also have personal cultural identities that strongly influence the ways that they approach their work with clients.

Here are the six guiding principles in our model:

1. Culture is relevant for career practices with all clients. Everyone has a unique culture, and we will share similarities and differences with all clients. However, due to the social construction of cultural dimensions, such as age, ethnicity, gender, religion, ability, sexual orientation and/or social class, some individuals have more challenges for access to and mobility through educational and employment systems.

2. Culture is relevant for all counsellors. Our notions of work, career, what is on- or off-track, and the meaning of work is influenced through our personal socialisation. In turn, professional socialisation shapes approaches in working with clients, and the underpinnings of those approaches may be more or less compatible with the views held by clients.

3. Views of career and career issues are culturally defined. There are debates about whether career or work fits the realities of most people’s lives, and each hold multiple meanings that are influenced by cultural assumptions and interpretations. It is critical that career practitioners assess the meaning of work in people’s lives.

4. Theories and models need to be culturally valid for our clients. Most popular theories of career development and career counselling are based on Western worldviews. Career
practitioners are encouraged to reflect about potential bias in career planning and decision-making processes that focus on individuality, linearity and assuming that work is a priority value for all clients. Due to economic and/or social circumstances, not all clients have freedom of choice or resources to be whatever they would like to be.

5. Collaboration is a foundation for defining the goals and processes of career counselling. We need to carefully consider what the goals of our clients are, and how well they match demands they are facing within their families, communities, and in systems of education and employment. It is prudent to remember that seeking career counselling is a foreign idea for many people and orienting people to the types of interventions possible, and how those interventions connect to client goals can help them to feel more engaged.

6. Career practitioners are challenged to see their roles and scope of practice in a bigger picture of social justice. Although it is important to work directly with clients to address their career-related issues, often their concerns are due to systemic barriers or lack of resources. Here, we are advocating for career development services that go beyond helping people to cope with their situation, and to address systemic and social barriers that contribute to barriers in education and employment.

Our model of CICC has evolved to incorporate a strong social justice focus. Unfortunately, we continue to see many examples in Canadian society where people have differential access to education and employment. We encourage career practitioners to share practice examples of how they have incorporated multiple levels of intervention, and taken steps towards addressing systemic and social change. We believe that career practitioners are uniquely positioned to work directly with clients, on their behalf, or through advocating for programs and services that will make a positive difference for people’s career development.

Nancy says: After working with thousands of clients in Career counselling over the years, I am grateful for the lessons they have taught me about using theory in practice. Sometimes I thought that my theoretical orientation really supported clients well in their career exploration and decision-making. However, there were other times when I was left feeling unsure about whether or not some clients with diverse cultural backgrounds were getting enough out of our work together. That reflection led me to look at how cultural diversity was addressed (or not!) in theories of career development and models of career counselling and what I could do better, as a practitioner, to increase the cultural validity of career counselling. This was the beginning of a quest that I could never have imagined would be so full of rich learning - about other people, about my role as a career practitioner and about myself - Nancy Arthur

Sandra says: One of the unique features of our model is the attention to multiple identities reflected in a broad conceptualisation of culture (e.g. ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, religion and ability). My work with women and within the LGBTT community has continued to highlight for me the interface of these cultural factors with career challenges and opportunities. The CICC model has evolved to provide a process for counsellors and clients to identify and navigate the complexities of issues like ‘coming out’ to colleagues and supervisors, managing sexual discrimination and harassment, or integrating non-traditional gender identities within workplaces that still anticipate and reward traditional gender role representations – Sandra Collins.

Dr Nancy Arthur – Professor & Canada Research Chair in Professional Education, Educational Studies in Counselling Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary.

Dr Sandra Collins – Professor, Centre for Graduate Education in Applied Psychology, Athabasca University
The authors have also kindly provided some references for our further reading and professional development in this area: