

The Vocational Card Sort used in Career Counselling with Disabled Ex-Services People

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Abstract

Persons who are medically discharged from HM Forces having acquired a disability of some kind, and other ex-Services men and women who become disabled later in civilian life, are at risk of unemployment and floundering in the labour market without targeted vocational assessment, guidance and counselling. Alongside a number of normative psychometric tests and instruments selectively used, a Vocational Card Sort developed in-house at the RBLI Vocational Assessment Centre, appears to have been especially useful in helping this client group achieve appropriate career development goals. A rationale for the use of the Vocational Card Sort with outcomes based on concrete examples is outlined in this paper.

Background

I was invited to establish on a greenfield site The Royal British Legion Industries' Vocational Assessment Centre (in March 1996) to serve ex-Services personnel with disabilities facing problems in gaining and retaining appropriate civilian employment. About 400 ex-Services women and men of rank equivalents from Private to Lieutenant-Colonel have undergone vocational assessment guidance and counselling over the last four years. Although a few took up employment soon afterwards, the vast majority identified latent potential, skills, strengths and interests, which enabled them to chart a more demanding but fulfilling career path for the future. Many took up vocational re-training and further education, with a significant minority securing

university places for degree-level study in disciplines ranging from Electronics and Sports Injury Rehabilitation to Psychology. A wide range of psychometric tests of ability, aptitude, personality, and interests including work samples, are selectively administered over two-and-a-half days of intensive, tailored intervention with each individual client. With guidance, most prepare their own CVs towards the end of the assessment period. The Measure of Guidance Impact is routinely used as a pre- and post-guidance instrument to evaluate the assessment programme and has consistently yielded statistically significant positive results (Jayasinghe 1998; Jayasinghe & O'Gorman 1998). Over the last four years, as a reflective practitioner, I have begun to appreciate the advantages of the social constructionist paradigm, and the narrative approach to career counselling, as being best suited to meet the needs of this client group (Cochran, 1997; Crossley, 2000; Jayasinghe, 2001, in press; McLeod, 1997). While not disdaining nomothetic psychometric tests, which continue to form the bedrock of psychological assessment, I have increasingly resorted to experimenting with idiographic procedures, with far greater face validity and effectiveness within a counselling approach.

Vocational Card Sort

One of the procedures I have found useful is derived from the vocational card sort first introduced by Leona Tyler at her 1960 Presidential Address to the APA Division of Counselling Psychology. Although she had tried to place her work within the individual differences tradition of experimental psychology, it was evident that she had been influenced by the work of George A. Kelly (1955) who, as a clinician, had advocated an idiographic stance in eliciting construct systems which govern people's behaviour. This is quite at variance with the nomothetic approach of mainstream psychology and cognitive behaviourism, the dominant paradigm in psychology for most of the 20th century. Even so, Kelly's Personal Construct Theory, described as a 'major superordinate theory for many psychological phenomena' (Scheer & Catinal, 1996: 13), has become very influential over the last 40 years with adherents in several European countries and Australasia.

'Man (and woman) as scientist' is the central tenet in Kelly's Personal Construct Theory. Just as the scientist aims to control more and more of reality by predicting events through experiment, every person tries to predict the course of events in their life and therefore to control outcomes that are important to them. All of us hold explicit, or for the most part implicit, theories about the world around us including significant others, while we develop hypotheses to test against 'reality'. We anticipate events and experiences, and our expectations may be unique to ourselves, or like some others', or like most others' within a culture or subculture. Our perceived constructions may be validated or invalidated, in some contexts but not in others, and we adjust our responses, attitudes and behaviour accordingly. Kelly gave the philosophical label constructive alternativism to the idea that, given our experiences, we choose to construct our own picture of the world, and relate to it in our own way. There are obviously many possibilities for growth and development in such a position, especially in a rapidly changing environment.

Unlike orthodox psychologists, Kelly does not separate human psychological processes (for example) into cognition, emotion and conation. His systemic, holistic approach defines human 'constructs', not as a theoretical concept as against an observable variable, but as a functional tool. In Kelly's theory, constructs are binary, or bi-polar. We invariably comprehend the world in terms of contrasts. For instance, we cannot grasp the concept of 'large' without simultaneously having some idea of what 'small' is. 'Fast' versus 'slow' depends very much on context. Constructs replicate events in our imagination, which shape our view of the world by continuous confirmation or disconfirmation. Like storytelling in narrative psychology, it is a never-ending process with possibilities for constantly shifting viewpoints and emphases. Constructs may be organised hierarchically, and may at times be contradictory or incompatible. These central tenets lead to a number of corollaries, which are outside the scope of this paper.

The locus of interest in Personal Construct Psychology is 'the analysis of the construct systems which an individual uses to analyse, understand, structure, change his/her environment' (Scheer & Catina, 1996: 15). Kelly introduced the Repertory Grid technique to explore the constructs, ideas, values and beliefs that make up an individual's personal construct system. The Repertory Grid has been used in many areas of human behaviour including psychotherapy and business applications. Applied to the careers domain, how it works is outlined below.

The Repertory Grid is a framework, which consists of three components:

- 1 The 'elements' or in our case 120 job titles printed on cards and a category labelled the 'Ideal Job'.
- 2 The 'constructs' or how the client construes and differentiates among elements or jobs which are usually elicited by asking the client to say how two jobs are similar to and different from a third.
- 3 A numerical score on a rating/ranking scale, (we use a five-point scale with 5 at the positive end of the scale and 1 the negative pole). They show how each of the jobs is subjectively assessed by the client in terms of his/her constructs.

From my perspective, I felt that it was futile to attempt statistical analyses just because quantitative data were available for a number of clients. Indeed, there are several computer software programs which attempt cognitive mapping, or make explicit people's mental models of a domain on the basis of scores on the Repertory Grid. Those interested need only to access the Internet for a vast array of information on PCT, Repertory Grid and computer programs such as Ingrid, Omnigrd and WebGrid.

Examples

The following are composite profiles to preserve confidentiality, but are based on the records of real clients.

One of my ex-Service clients, aged 47, was recovering well from a head injury, but was no longer as physically active as he used to be. He had been a Corporal with the Royal Logistic Corps. On the Repertory Grid, he scored equally highly on 'Restaurant Manager' and 'Transport Manager', identical to his score for the Ideal Job. The positive constructs elicited were listed as 'excitement', 'sociability', 'communication', 'creativity', 'variety/activity', and 'team work'. On the contrasting negative pole were 'dull/boring', 'non-co-operative', 'negative/rude', 'destructive', 'routine/repetitive' and 'being alone'. Having discussed and obtained more information on the two jobs he clearly preferred, and making allowances for some practical considerations, he decided to prepare for a career as a 'Transport

Manager'. He accessed the local training information database on how to gain the appropriate qualifications on a relatively short evening course at a further education college. When he was offered an even shorter course on a residential basis at the Royal British Legion Training Company Tidworth College in Hampshire, he took this up straightaway. He gained the Certificate of Professional Competence in Transport Management at the end of the course. However, with full family agreement, he had to relocate to Kent, before he could obtain a job as a Fleet Manager.

A 30-year-old ex-Service woman who had been an office worker with her Regiment had been strongly advised by her Resettlement Officer to remain in such work as a civilian. She was told that she could earn 'good money' as a temporary secretary in London. She had suffered from a prolapsed disc and was due to be medically discharged. Scoring 58 items correct on the 60-item Ravens Standard Progressive Matrices Test, she showed herself to possess a very high level of 'fluid' intelligence. With good scores on other aptitude tests, she showed clear potential for tertiary academic education, a possibility that she had not entertained before. The Vocational Card Sort pointed to expressive, creative and artistic interests allied to publishing and book editing. A three-month follow-up revealed that she had taken up an Open University Degree course in the Humanities having decided on a long-term perspective regarding a future career, a position fully supported by her partner.

Conclusion

Traditionally, a career intervention has been time-limited, technique-oriented, often fragmented, and isolated from other aspects of a client's life. Investigators into the theory and practice of career counselling have pointed to the lack of research on the importance of the quality of client-counsellor relationships (Slaney & MacKinnon-Slaney, 2000: 375). That this is an important parameter is revealed in the comment at the end of her assessment by the young woman client above, that the 'counsellor must be proud of what he does for a living'. The ex-Corporal in his characteristic way said that he came to assessment like Mickey Rooney, but left feeling more like John Wayne. These were both unsolicited feedback.

Career counselling, especially when one uses the Vocational Card Sort, becomes not just an interview but more a conversation between equals. It helps the counsellor relate to the client as a whole person who needs to be understood and involved in the counselling relationship. The Vocational Card Sort used as a basis for exploring the unique personal space of the client is interesting and involving for both client and counsellor. It is hoped that the new government initiatives in developing Personal Adviser roles for a wide range of clients seeking vocational guidance will incorporate a counselling element, which enhances the quality of the encounter. In such a context, it is empirical validity that should be sought and not the mechanical reliability and validity of mainstream experimental psychology.

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