General Considerations

Social Definitions of Disability
The definition of disability has changed along with the views of society. Older definitions of disability were born from a medical model, (Hahn, 1993) where disability was viewed as an impairment. More recent definitions of disability view it (from a career development perspective) as a socially-constructed demographic variable which may operate as a risk factor for difficulties with career development and employment attainment (Szymborski, 1999).

People with disabilities are a heterogeneous group, so a broad and inclusive definition is appropriate, as disability exists along a wide continuum. A person’s reaction to their disability depends on a number of factors such as personality, age, exposure to prejudice, and intelligence. Understanding a client’s view of their disability is important, and a counselor might be wise to avoid making assumptions about how a person views their disability.

Factors Influencing Career Development

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Transition to Work & Adult Living

Unfortunately, post high school employment outcomes for young adults with disabilities are dismal. Successful adjustment to adulthood is relatively rare for those with disabilities. In a national longitudinal study, only 20% of youths had achieved successful adjustment to adult life 5 years after high school graduation (Wagner et al., 1993).

Finding employment after high school is most likely for youths with learning disabilities, and least likely for youths who have severe or multiple impairments, such as those with intellectual disabilities (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996).

A limitation of transition (school-to-work) and vocational rehabilitation programs is that they often fail to integrate theory and practice. Such programs often focus on initial employment as the only outcome measure, effectively ignoring the process of career development (Fabian & Liesener, 2005).

Theoretical Support

The theory most applied to studying the career behavior of individuals with disabilities so far has been Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

Psychosocial Factors

- Client reactions to disability are influenced by a wide variety of individual attributes and circumstances (e.g., family background and support, educational attainment, work-related aspirations) as well as environmental supports and available services.
- Evidence suggests that employer attitudes toward individuals with certain disabilities have remained negative despite the passage of the ADA (Unger, 2001). For example, stereotypes about individuals with psychiatric diagnoses have contributed to poor employment rates associated with this group (Diksa & Rogers, 1996).
- Negative attitudes about individuals with disabilities may negatively impact the work-related self-efficacy and future work expectations of these individuals (Fabian, 2000). This phenomenon is comparable to the experiences of other minority groups (e.g., Brown, 1995; Hackett & Byars, 1996).
- Self-perceptions of work capacity may be severely limited among individuals with disabilities, many of whom may have little experience with competitive employment (Fabian & Liesener, 2005).

Functional Capacity

- It is currently widely accepted that disability should be defined within an environmental or ecological context, shifting the focus from a symptom or impairment orientation to a functional orientation (Fabian & Liesener, 2005). Important assumptions underlying a functional approach to exploring the relationship between disability and vocational performance include:
  1. Functional capacities tend to be situationally-specific (MacDonald-Wilson, Rogers, & Anthony, 2001).
  2. It is more important to change the physical and social environment than to change the individual (WIC, 2001).
  3. Vocational and career assessments should emphasize a person-in-environment perspective.
- Employers often rely on stereotypes of disability and thus exaggerate the extent to which a functional impairment may interfere with vocational performance (e.g., Feinstein & Thebargo, 1991; Unger, 2001).

Implications for Practice

The tradition in career counseling for people with disabilities concentrated on matching capabilities to job demands. That approach often led to suboptimal outcomes since the vocational evaluations aimed to measure deficits, which can overly limit career choices (Fabian & Liesener, 2005).

Strengths-based approaches partly alleviate the above problem, but issues with using a traditional assessment paradigm may exist, such as problems with the application of standardized assessments and a lack of validated measures for people with disabilities (Farker & Sclater, 2003).

Assessment strategies can be modified to improve their applicability for this population. Modifications to consider include the involvement of family members in helping the person to identify interests and skills (Hanger & DiLeo, 1993), the incorporation of observation and informal interviewing (Power, 2000) and contextually-specific assessment, in which the person’s abilities are observed and evaluated within the environmental context(s) of interest.

Limited evidence exists for the efficacy of interventions which aim to increase self-efficacy among college students with disabilities (e.g., Connors & Szymborski, 1998; Fabian, 2000) but more research is needed to study the efficacy of interventions based upon other vocational theories such as Super, Savickas, and Super’s (1990) developmental theory and Savickas’s vocational hope intervention (1990) for assessment and intervention purposes with this population.

Conclusions

1. Practice using person-first language.
2. Social definitions of disability have shifted from an impairment view to an empowerment view.
3. Work in-session to understand a client’s self-views regarding his or her disability.
4. Transition programs often fail to incorporate vocational theory, omitting career development.
5. Social Cognitive Career Theory is useful for understanding career among this population.
6. Employ a strengths-based assessment approach, and tailor assessments of functional capacity to the contextual environment(s) of interest.
7. Use interventions that target known career problem areas, such as low career self-efficacy and outcome expectations, unidentified interests/skills, and career maturity. Further intervention efficacy studies are needed.