Career Counseling for Parents of Children with Autism

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Abstract
This study conducts a literature review on financial situations and career barriers that faced by parents of children with autism. Implications for counseling for children with autism are discussed.

Introduction
The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 70) describes the essential features of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as “the presence of markedly abnormal or impaired development in social interaction and communication and a restricted repertoire of activity and interests which manifest prior to 3 years of age”. The diagnostic criteria for ASD are essentially behavioural, including specific levels of qualitative impairment in three core domains: social communication, social interaction, and imagination (Newschaffer et al., 2006). These core domains are often referred to in ASD literature as the triad of impairments (McAleese, Lavery, & Dyer, 2014).

In recent years, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has received increasingly greater attention. To a large extent, this focus is due to the dramatic increase in ASD prevalence rates, which are currently at 1:88 children in the United States (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2012). Thus, ASD ranks as the fastest-growing developmental disability in America over the past 10 years (Stoner, 2014).

Despite a broader societal awareness of ASD, “the impact of childhood autism on parental employment is largely unknown” (Montes & Halterman, 2008, p. 202). In addition, no research has examined the role of workplace support, especially as it pertains to working parents of children with ASD (Stoner, 2014).

Thus, many questions remain. For example, what workplace accommodations do parents of children with ASD find most important? Can employees remain vital and productive high performers once a child with ASD enters their lives? How should managers respond in order to demonstrate appropriate sensitivity to the needs of these parents while ensuring team equity within a framework of escalating performance expectations? (Stoner, 2014) How should career counselors be cautious when providing therapy to these parents?

The purpose of this project is to explore financial situations and career barriers that parents of children with autism face and explore potential career counseling in applications.

Impacts on employment
Financial struggle:
Intensive behavioral interventions (e.g., applied behavior analysis [ABA] therapy) may cost between $40,000 and $60,000 per year, and medical costs are estimated to range from $2,100 to $11,200 annually. In addition, the cost to communities to educate children with ASD is estimated at $13,000 per year per student (Autism Society, n.d.). The average loss of annual income associated with having a child with ASD was Chinese RenMinBi (RMB) 44,077 ($7,226) (Ou, et al., 2015).

Employment impacts:
Work and employment are affected. For example, parents of children with ASD are under much more likely to report that childcare problems substantially affect their employment decisions than parents of typically developing children (Montes & Halterman, 2008).

58% of families with ASD reported that childcare problems had greatly affected their employment decisions in Ou’s study in China (Ou, et al., 2015).

A recent study also found that children with ASD are 9% less likely to have both parents employed in the United States (Ou, et al., 2015). In China, caregivers, typically mothers, have to be with their autistic children by themselves every moment in daily life, even when the child attends teaching in special education schools. This model is very common, and is more likely to bring serious disruptions in employment conditions for many families (Ou et al., 2015).

Two reasons play in the difficulty in employment of parents of children with autism: (1) the inability to find and sustain adequate childcare given the complex and idiosyncratic nature of their child’s needs (Brennan & Brannan, 2005; LeRoy & Johnson, 2002; Rosenzweig, Brennan, Huffstetter, & Bradley, 2008; Rosenzweig, Brennan, & Ogilvie, 2002) and (2) finding employment which offers enough flexibility that the demands of caregiving and work can coexist (Freedman, Litchfield, & Warfield, 1995; Rosenzweig et al., 2002; Todd & Shearn, 1996). Parents of children with autism stated that their child was central and that their child had to come first (Stoner, 2015).

Application of Career Construction Theory
In 21 century, career is not about maturation in one stable medium, but adaptation to changing landscape. Career Construction Theory views career as story that individuals tell about their working life (Savickas, 2013). The related skills can be applied to career counseling for parents of children with Autism. This counseling helps to assist clients improve their self-efficacy, recognize priorities in lives, and seek meaning out of their career.

Application of Career Construction Theory Cont.
Career Construction Counseling concentrates on clients making meaning of their jobs, generating intentions for work and taking purposive action as they design their lives to balance work and family, negotiate occupational transitions with employers, and cope with troubles at work (Savickas, 2013) especially relating to taking care of their children with autism.

Opening: counselors asking these parents how career counseling may be useful to help them. Thus a shared goal between counselor and client could be shared.

Constructing: counselors eliciting stories about important incidents and self-defining moments happened in clients’ lives.

Deconstructing: in this step, counselors can consider whether client’s stories have self-limiting ideas, confining roles, or realistic barriers in their employment.

Reconstructing: integrating the small stories into a large story that helped clients recognize priorities and recurrent action tendencies.

Performing: The new meanings turns intention into action (Savickas, 2013). Clients might find new meanings of their career which might motivate them better to commit to career. By working practice, self-efficacy may be improved.

In addition to applying Construction theory, it is noteworthy that parents of children with autism face significant stress from their children, families and the reality of financial situation. Thus, individual therapy is recommended to be integrated.

At the same time, counselors should get involved in advocating for the equal and respectful environment for better living for all population, and recommend helpful resources to clients.

Conclusions
In addition to mental stress, parents of children with autism also face financial struggles and employment difficulty.

Career Construction Theory may be a good application for this population to improve their self-efficacy and create new meanings for career.

In addition to career counseling, individual therapy is also recommended to clients for their better mental health. Varies resources need to be provided to clients to help their mental and financial condition.

Counselor should get involved in advocacy for social justice and equality in career for this population.

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References