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## **27. QUALITATIVE CAREER ASSESSMENT APPROACHES IN HONG KONG**

*Reflections from a Confucian Cultural Heritage Perspective*

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we first reflect on the current use of career assessment generally and qualitative career assessment specifically in the context of Chinese students in Hong Kong. We review general approaches to career assessment, guidance and support in Chinese schools, colleges and universities, summarising strengths and weaknesses in current provisions. We then discuss briefly an evaluation of the Chinese version of My System of Career Influences Reflection Activity (MSCI; McMahon, Patton & Watson, 2005) with Chinese secondary students. Finally, issues in qualitative assessment in career counselling in the Asian Confucian heritage context are highlighted.

Career assessment is “a process of gathering data about a person in relation to a career choice, decision, or issue” (Leong & Leung, 1994, p. 247). Its major goal is to facilitate exploration of career options and opportunities, to assist with the making of effective career choices, and to resolve any career concerns that an individual may have (Walsh & Betz, 1990). For many years, career assessment has been considered an integral part of career counselling (Whiston & Rahardja, 2005) and traditionally quantitative assessment tools have been used for this purpose, while qualitative approaches have been less evident (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003). This is certainly true of the situation in Asia.

Quantitative career assessment relies mainly on the use of standardised psychometric instruments (tests, inventories and scales) to generate scores that can be used to distinguish among a group of people with different psychological traits and aptitudes (Hartung & Borges, 2005). The major concerns in quantitative career assessment relate to the standardisation of the administration procedure, test reliability and validity, scoring and interpretation of results, and the applicability of the test norms to a specific group or an individual.

Qualitative career assessment, on the other hand, “entails subjective appraisals via interviews, life histories, and narratives that yield stories to indicate life patterns and themes” (Hartung & Borges, 2005, p. 440). Examples of qualitative career assessment tools include card sorts, genograms, lifelines (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003), Life Career Assessment (LCA), and the Life Role Analysis (LRA; Gysbers, 2006). Using a qualitative career approach, issues of standardisation

and psychometric aspects of tests are not major concerns. The use of qualitative career assessment tools does not mean, however, that there is a lack of rigour in the process. The development of qualitative career assessment procedures must still meet appropriate criteria and standards—such as grounding the assessment process in a relevant theory, extensively testing and validating the career assessment process, ensuring a reasonable time frame for conducting assessments, providing easily understood instructions for conducting the assessment, and developing strategies for encouraging collaboration between career counsellor and client (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003). In addition, effective qualitative career assessments usually require a debriefing session to follow up on issues that may have arisen during the interview or narrative process.

#### CAREER GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES IN HONG KONG

Every year in Hong Kong approximately 17000 university graduates and 61000 secondary school leavers either enter the labour market or pursue further studies. Traditionally, the main responsibility for career preparation has rested on the graduates themselves and their families. However, to facilitate a smooth transition to employment or further study, career services are increasingly being made available to students by their secondary schools, universities, and by the Labour Department of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government. The Labour Department (2014) provides one-stop advisory and support services (Youth Employment Start) for individuals aged between 15 and 29, helping them to begin their career on the right track by enhancing their employability and by disseminating the latest labour market information. These services are provided by social workers and labour officers.

In the past, career development services in secondary schools have often seemed to be superficial, relying on large-scale single-impact programmes—career talks, seminars, discussions with potential employers, and one-off visits to view companies or organisations. Comprehensive and personalised interventions focusing on self-exploration have not been common (Leung, 2002). More recently, however, career education programs have been implemented using curriculum materials for life planning and guidance developed by the Hong Kong Association of Careers Masters and Guidance Masters (Ho, 2008).

Career guidance and counselling in schools is mostly delivered by career teachers who also have ordinary teaching duties (Yuen, Chan & Lee, 2014). Usually, these career teachers have received training in career guidance and counselling sponsored by the Education Bureau. However, they are not qualified to administer quantitative career assessment instruments, so these are seldom used in schools. Instead, qualitative assessment tools are used, such as career planning workbooks and the curriculum materials provided by the Hong Kong Association of Careers Masters and Guidance Masters (Yuen, Leung & Chan, 2014).

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Career services provided by universities represent a more comprehensive approach. This typically includes career guidance and counselling, psychological testing, career assessment, job-search workshops, career education programs, recruitment services, and internship programs. In Hong Kong, nearly all public colleges and universities offer career services to their students, assisting them to formulate a career development plan and enhancing their employability. These services play an important role in smoothing the transition from university to work and they are implemented by career advisors operating under the aegis of the Student Affairs Office in the universities.

Career counsellors now attempt to adopt a more developmental perspective by offering a wide variety of services to meet students' needs at different stages during their time at university. The typical career service requires its staff to use a wide range of intervention skills in conducting assessment, individual counselling, and information dissemination (Leung, 2002). Computer-assisted career assessment systems and e-platforms, such as PROSPECTS Planner and TARGET jobs, are also used. However, there remains a traditional belief that formal career assessment tools help career counsellors understand various aspects of their clients, including interests, aptitude, values, and personality. Thus assessment still looms large as a major role of career counsellors. Surfing the websites of career centres in universities in Hong Kong reveals that quantitative career assessment tools are most commonly mentioned, while very few references are made to qualitative career assessment. Standardised psychometric scales are widely used, such as Career Dimension TM (McKim, 2005) and the Work Values Inventory (WVI) (Super, 1968). These instruments are tools developed in the West, using English as the medium for presentation. In most cases, translated versions in Chinese have not been re-standardised and validated for the local context (Leung, 2002). These instruments therefore still lack psychometric evidence to support their reliability and validity for the Hong Kong population.

Beyond the university provisions in Hong Kong, a career assessment kit has been developed by Professor Wong Chi-sum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong for use within the Youth Employment Start (YES) program. This material helps young people explore and understand their career interests, personality, emotional intelligence, career maturity and entrepreneurship potential. Young people can take the career assessment tests online and then seek professional consultation and career counselling at the YES Centre. The services are available in Chinese and English (Labour Department, 2014).

## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF CURRENT CAREER ASSESSMENT

The predominant use of quantitative career assessment in Hong Kong's universities represents both strength and weakness in the service. On the positive side, quantitative career assessment tools present an objective, professional and authoritative image, so they easily win the confidence of both the tester and the client. However, on the negative side problems such as cultural bias in many instruments have been raised

by various researchers (Leong & Leung, 1994; Lonner, 1985; Westermeyer, 1987). Another weakness in relying only on quantitative career assessment is that it does not reveal subtle personality and attitudinal factors in clients that can be important for career planning, and can best be discovered by qualitative evaluation.

In reference to the strengths of qualitative career assessment, Goldman (1992) reported that the advantages include a more active role for clients, being more integrative and holistic than psychometric tests, operating within a developmental framework, facilitating an intimate counsellor-client relationship, flexibility, adaptability, and application to diverse populations. In contrast, disadvantages include the demands placed on counsellors in terms of requiring more professional skills and techniques, the time consuming nature of one-on-one sessions, lack of hard evidence of the reliability and validity of informal methods, and being more subjective (Goldman, 1992). Some qualitative career assessment tools are criticised for not undergoing a rigorous process for development. For instance, some qualitative tools are not grounded in a sound career theory, and some do not even come with a manual that guides their application. The validity and reliability of qualitative career assessment procedures still lack systematic evaluation and standardisation in this part of Asia. Such evaluation should be a high priority for the immediate future, so that the qualitative approach can be interpreted more perceptively with reference to Chinese culture and career opportunities.

The conclusion to be reached is that both types of career assessment have strengths to offer and can be complementary. Researchers recommend merging both forms of assessment to enrich the process and yield more robust results (Hartung & Borges, 2005; Maree & Morgan, 2012; Whiston & Rahardja, 2005). With the gradually increasing use of qualitative career assessment in Hong Kong, both quantitative and qualitative instruments should be incorporated into career guidance and counselling processes. This will result in a more comprehensive picture of clients than could be obtained by either method alone.

A stage has been reached in Hong Kong where more attention should be paid to qualitative career assessment in counsellors' training. A socio-constructivist orientation, as suggested by Walsh (1996), could be adopted, with more emphasis placed on gaining an in-depth understanding of clients by listening to their interpretation of current and past circumstances, and their hopes and aspirations. One approach that appears to be promising is the application of My System of Career Influences (McMahon, Patton & Watson, 2005). It has the potential to contribute significantly to a qualitative approach to career counselling in Hong Kong.

#### USE OF MY SYSTEM OF CAREER INFLUENCES (MSCI)

The MSCI (McMahon, Patton & Watson, 2005) provides a step-by-step approach to assist clients in creating their own career narratives by reflecting on influences on their career path (McMahon & Watson, 2008). In particular, this instrument enables an individual to consider how his/her past, present and future come into play in career decision making.

The usefulness of the MSCI to Hong Kong Chinese students was an issue that required exploration in a small-scale study conducted by the first named author, as described below. In order to avoid language barriers a Chinese version of the MSCI workbook was adopted (Yuen et al., 2009). Six secondary school leavers (three males and three females) were invited to take part in a trial. The participants were in the age range of 17 and 20, and all had completed Grade 11 in their education. All participants took part in the two-hour session for completing the instrument, and stayed for another 20 minutes to share feedback on the process and content of the MSCI. Their views were later analysed and are summarised here. In addition, each participant took part in a 30-minute one-on-one follow-up session.

Most participants expressed positive feedback on the MSCI process and found it useful. Some commented that by compiling their own system of influences they were able to discover underlying themes of their life narrative. Some conveyed a message that completion of the MSCI had helped signify to them their commitment to put thoughts and words into actions. For example, one participant discovered that after going through the MSCI process she was even more committed to her career choice (flight attendant) despite her family's expectation of her becoming a police inspector. All participants concurred that the 30-minute follow-up session with the facilitator was also of great value to them, 'better than just filling out the MSCI instrument'. They added that the mutual exchanges with the facilitator in the individual session consolidated their insights for career planning and decision-making.

In terms of the appropriateness of the MSCI, all participants expressed the view that this assessment process is appropriate for individuals in the senior years of the secondary school and above, but less so for younger students. Most participants found the questions and instructions in the Chinese MSCI reasonably easy to comprehend. However, some participants commented that if it were not for their prior exposure to career concepts in school it would be difficult to understand items such as: "I confirm my values" and my "system of career influences".

The participants stated that their initial impression when picking up the MSCI booklet was 'like attending their secondary school examination and writing up their examination papers'...far too many words and it took too long to complete. Examples and illustrations can be helpful for aiding comprehension in instruments where there is a need to clarify difficult concepts. When asked about the inclusion of examples in the MSCI, participants' views were mixed. Some thought that the more examples provided the better it would be for them to understand instructions.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this brief trial in Hong Kong is that the MSCI and its narrative approach can be useful in career counselling, but the instrument may need to be modified in ways suggested by the participants. The qualitative career assessment process can be made more helpful to individuals in their career planning if the follow-up session is carefully structured by the career counsellor.

## CAREER GUIDANCE IN ASIAN HERITAGE CULTURAL CONTEXT

Career guidance is still very much a work in progress in East Asia, including Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore. Although it is developing its own unique features, career guidance in this region still draws to some extent upon tradition and on Western ideas and practices. Value conflicts can arise between Western individualism and Confucian cultural heritage (Hwang, 2009) and this can impact on attempts to provide career support in schools and universities. Education, cinema and the media have tended to transmit to Asia, albeit unintentionally, Western individualistic values of dominance, self-expression and competition, which then come into conflict with local collectivistic virtues of modesty, self-suppression, family-centredness and cultural identity in the region (Kwan, 2009; Yang, 2003; Zhang et al., 2014).

The Confucian value of benevolence (*rén*) emphasises the maintenance of interpersonal harmony by following the principle of respecting superiors, and taking care of family (Hwang, 2001). The value of filial piety (*xiào*) emphasises respect for one's family, parents and ancestors by following the principle of obedience. In terms of pursuing a career, one would perform well so as to bring honour (*face*) to the family and be in a position to support one's parents. When there are conflicts in values between parents' expectations and their children's interests, the career practitioner needs to act as mediator (Hwang, 2009; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In qualitative career assessment, such as the MSCI, it would be advantageous for individuals to explore the influences of family and Confucian values in relation to their career aspirations and goals.

While Western career counselling emphasises individual decision making, students in Confucian heritage societies tend to be influenced most by the expectations of their teachers and parents in their career planning (Cheng & Yuen, 2012; Leung, Hou, Gati & Li, 2011). Asian parents emphasise the importance of learning, and they make investments in their children's education (Phillipson, 2013). Parents also tend to adhere strongly to traditional values regarding career status when influencing their children's career paths. To help students resolve possible conflicts, career development practitioners in schools may need to involve parents more directly. Information and opinions from parents may represent an important component in comprehensive qualitative career assessment in Confucian cultural societies.

In terms of career practitioner training, multi-cultural sensitivity should be strengthened so that career practitioners are better able to understand and meet the needs of their clients (Leung & Chen, 2009). This multi-cultural sensitivity can help considerably when interpreting information gleaned from qualitative career assessments such as the MSCI. With regard to future research, it would be interesting to explore the greater use of narrative dialogue for qualitative career assessment in Confucian heritage societies (Reid, 2005). It is also necessary to conduct ongoing studies to discover how best to adapt or modify qualitative procedures that originate in the West to suit local cultural contexts.

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In sum, value conflicts can arise between Western individualism and Confucian cultural heritage in East Asian regions. Using qualitative career assessment, career counsellors could empower individuals to explore the influences of their family, parents and Confucian values in relation to their career aspirations and goals.

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