



Using Integrative Life Planning (ILP) in Your Professional Development

Why should we as counselors be concerned about helping clients or students create holistic lives? How can learning such a new approach affect our own professional development? The purpose of this article is to widen perceptions of what is possible in career development as we look at our lives more broadly and consider a wider range of personal and societal factors in planning for our future.

What Is Integrative Life Planning?



Integrative Life Planning (ILP) as an approach to career development came out of a need expressed by many of Hansen's counseling students for career counseling that incorporated more than work. This was a view that Hansen shared and developed into a concept that made sense for those who want, need, or have a more holistic approach to life. Since it was developed in the '90s, it has been used with re-entry adults, college students, students in counselor preparation, and international clients in about a dozen countries. As described in Hansen's 1997 book, quilts and their pieces are the primary metaphor of ILP. "Weaving Our Lives into a Meaningful Whole" is the circle that surrounds the patches in the quilt. Counselors who learn and implement such an approach can take their own professional development to a new level.

Societal Rationale for Using ILP in Career Counseling

Dramatic global changes in work, education, families, and society require counselors to re-examine our profession and ways in which counselors are being prepared to function effectively in the 21st century. Integrative Life Planning offers a lens through which to examine the contexts of people's lives and determine ways to assist with career/life planning issues. It is an interdisciplinary, holistic concept that focuses on systems; a life planning process that helps counselors and clients develop a big picture perspective, not only on "work within a life," but life across cultures. It advocates developing worldviews and life plans that not only provide satisfaction to individuals but, even more important, benefit our communities and society.

Personal Rationale for Using ILP in Career Counseling

- 1) We need to help our clients or students develop skills in *integrative thinking*, as contrasted with linear thinking.
- 2) Clients, students, or employees need to understand the importance of "Big Picture" *holistic thinking* (putting things together into a large whole) as different from reductionist thinking (breaking things into their smallest parts).
- 3) They also need to be aware of prioritizing the major themes or critical tasks in their own lives and culture as essential parts of human development and life planning.
- 4) A new kind of self-knowledge (gained through exposure to a variety of structured activities such as lifelines, journaling, finding balance, career as story, visualizations, the career rainbow, and the circle of life) is critical to understanding the contexts and themes of holistic life planning—beyond knowledge of career assessments and occupational information.
- 5) Recognition of the need for change in self and community and commitment to change in persons, organizations, professions, and society are essential to an integrative life planning process.

Critical Life Tasks of Integrative Life Planning

At the core of Integrative Life Planning are six life tasks (in no special order), which recently have been somewhat modified, partly due to feedback from readers and users of the concept. These tasks are described here briefly, and addressed more fully in the career counseling practitioner section which follows:

1. Finding work that needs doing and that provides economic self-sufficiency in changing global contexts.

"Finding work that needs doing" is very different from looking at occupations on a computer and finding one or two which seem to "fit." Rosa Parks, considered by many to be the founder of the Civil Rights movement, describes this task well in relation to social justice when she says:

"There is work to do: That is why I cannot stop or sit still. As long as a child needs help, as long as people are not free, there will be work to do. As long as an elderly person is attacked or in need of support, there is work to do. As long as we have bigotry and crime, we have work to do. I think it is important to tell my story. We have come so far since the days of segregation, but there is always something to do to make things better." (In Palmer, 2000, pp. 32-34)

In reflecting on this task, Hansen identified several areas or challenges where she believes there is work that needs doing, including the following:

"Utilizing technology constructively, preserving the environment, understanding work and workplace changes; understanding family changes; reducing violence; advocating for human rights; accepting changing gender roles; valuing human diversity, finding spirituality and purpose; and discovering and utilizing new ways of knowing." (Hansen, 1997, p. 52)

Note that many of these reflect the important social justice and societal betterment emphases of ILP. This task also encompasses creating new occupations in response to societal needs. Many of the women's centers of the late 20th century and numerous programs for adults, for example, were developed to meet some of these needs.

2. Connecting family and work

The task of “connecting family and work” reflects the changing roles of women and men at the end of the 20th century and the need to examine how both are changing in relation to societal goals and personal needs. This task also reflects the increased involvement of women in the workforce and emphasizes the need to reduce the pervasive gender stereotyping in diverse cultures and to work toward constructive socialization for gender equality. Because of continuing traditional attitudes toward the roles of men and women, this task can be difficult. Considerable conflict can arise if partners or spouses do not agree on such issues as role division, work loads, and the need for balance in both.

A senior student in a psychology course in a liberal arts college had this to say in reaction to the work and family task:

“Equality in work and living will likely bring more satisfaction for both women and men.

Understanding men’s struggles gives me more patience and desire to reach this equality together, not just to blame men for what is wrong and tell them to change.”

3. Valuing pluralism and diversity

This task has drawn much attention in the last two decades. The need to understand and interact with those who are different from us—taking into account not only traditionally underrepresented groups, but all of the new immigrants and refugees in our cultures—has become an important multicultural task. We have also learned about the importance of understanding and respecting the “Dimensions of Personal Identity” identified by Arredondo, et al, 1996. The primary dimensions include culture, ethnicity, gender, language, physical disability, race, sexual orientation, social class, and age. Other dimensions include educational background, geography,

income, marital status, religion, work experience, citizenship status, military experience, and hobbies or recreational activities. Surrounding all of these is the existence of historical moments or eras such as depressions or recessions, civil rights movements, wars, and the like, which can have a powerful impact on personal identity.

4. Managing personal transitions and organizational change

This task requires us to look at the dramatic changes which have occurred and continue to occur in work and the workplace. The changing workplace with the “old psychological contract” (“with benefits, vacations, tenure, and pensions) is being replaced by a “new psychological contract” which may mean more personal planning for one’s career along with increased transitions for workers. This task also emphasizes the need for individuals to understand a model

of steps for change, and ways to become constructive change agents (Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson, 2006).

5. Exploring spirituality, meaning, and life purpose

The last task of “Exploring Spirituality, Meaning, and Life Purpose” also has become a common theme in career counseling literature in the last two decades (e.g. Bloch & Richmond, 1997, Savickas, 1997). The term *spirituality* has been defined in different ways, but in broad terms it means “the experience of integration and wholeness, a sense of the interrelatedness of all of life” (Kratz, 1987). According to Fox, who creatively discussed the reinvention of work within a spiritual context,

Life and livelihood ought not to be separated but to flow from the same source, which is the spirit... spirit means life, and both life and livelihood are about living

in depth, living with meaning, purpose, joy, and a sense of contributing to the greater community (Fox, 1994).

Another relevant definition is that of *vocation*, which has been described as “The place where your deep gladness and the world’s hunger meet. Go with your work where you most need to go and where you are most needed” (Buechner, 1985). Some authors prefer to approach this task from a perspective of meaning and purpose, of which there is an abundant literature. Other authors stress the importance of having passion for your work.

6. Attending to Our Health

After a recent modification, a new ILP task has been added: “Attending to Our Health—Physical, Mental, and Emotional,” a task which should have been included in the original list. This task appears subtly in the original version but needs to be far more explicit. Hansen realized this in 2004 after having to deal with four major illnesses in three years. When she mentioned in a speech in San Francisco that she was adding this task to the others, the audience responded with spontaneous applause, and many came up to the podium afterward to share related aspects of their own health and to reinforce her decision to include it.

The graphic depicts the new pattern of ILP: Weaving Our Lives into a Meaningful Whole as representing the circle of our lives, with the six tasks shown in the rectangular pieces of the life quilt. In using this metaphor with clients or students, the counselor or instructor can help them identify the task or tasks that are most important to them at this stage of their lives, pointing out that they will likely deal with some of the others later on. Identifying one’s priorities can be an important lesson in applying ILP with different groups. When presenting ILP to a psychology class of college seniors, one instructor reported some

insightful quotations from the students, as, for example, one who said:

“Some of these tasks will occur at different times for different people as they live and plan their lives. I think that four of these tasks are particularly relevant to my life right now, and these are probably the parts of ILP that I will carry with me.”

Another said, “ILP is not just a new approach to job seeking and talent finding; it is a working example of how to put together all the parts of life one encounters in a successful and meaningful way.”

APPLYING INTEGRATIVE LIFE PLANNING IN CAREER COUNSELING

One of the most persuasive strengths of ILP is its ease of applicability within career counseling. The creative focus that permeates the model seems to encourage career counseling practitioners to design innovative interventions based on ILP’s principles and to customize according to the individual needs of a wide variety of clients.

Another positive aspect of the model is its adaptability to a number of different structural approaches.

Weaving Our Lives into a Meaningful Whole with Integrative Life Planning (ILP)



For example, a counselor might select a single ILP theme, such as the first, as the sole basis for work with a client. This theme might be incorporated seamlessly with any number of classic career counseling models, from trait and factor, to developmental or constructivist approaches. Thus, a client might be encouraged not only to consider class factors such as interests, values, and skills in making a career decision, but also ILP-linked factors such as social justice relevance and service to the global community as well. One, several, or all of ILP’s critical life tasks can be integrated and woven into a holistic fabric of work with a client. What’s more, one or more of these themes can be used in a single session or over multiple sessions.

The following task applications are only a few examples of the ways in which counselors can draw on ILP principles to support their work with clients and to inspire and inform their own lives and careers as well:

Finding Work that Needs Doing in Changing Global Contexts.

As counselors, we can encourage clients to think beyond the career arenas with which they are already familiar to consider work that strengthens their communities and society at large (i.e. perhaps considering a move from corporate trainer to classroom teacher or from accountant in a large firm to one working in an association or non-profit.). This task relates to the citizenship or civic engagement role.

Attending to Our Health—Physical, Mental & Emotional.

In the midst of our work in supporting our clients, our families, and our communities, we must create the time and space to preserve and build our own health. Adequate rest, exercise, healthful eating, and a balanced pace can protect us from burnout and (with good genes and a bit of luck) enable us to extend our working lives for as long as we might wish. This not only ensures

that we can continue to serve others, but also enables us to model healthy behaviors for the benefit of all those we care about.

Connecting Family and Work, Including Changing Gender Roles.

We can partner with our clients in examining the gender roles in their homes as they consider sources of both satisfaction and stress in their work lives. We can engage both male and female clients in actively discussing the work/family connection by posing questions like:

- How would you describe the balance of work at home between yourself and your partner? (Who does what and how often?)
- How does this affect you on a daily basis? A weekly basis?
- What strategies could you use in discussing and revisiting this topic and finding more effective ways to re-balance the workload in your home?

Valuing Pluralism and Inclusivity.

Counselors should consciously promote pluralism/ diversity through inclusive language and illustrations, both in individual sessions with clients and when speaking to groups. We should make an effort to reference role models and relate vignettes and examples that cross gender and ethnic barriers and suggest salient readings and films from a broad range of cultural traditions. We should also examine our own ethnic or racial identity.

Exploring Spirituality and Life Meaning or Purpose.

As counselors, we should become increasingly comfortable discussing spiritual values with clients in the context of career development. We can learn to foster discussions on meaning as a central value in career satisfaction and use examples from a wide range of religious traditions (e.g. Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam) to illustrate relevant career points. We can also

introduce the concepts of “mission” and/or “passion” to accentuate the importance of this task.

Managing Personal Transitions and Organizational Change.

We should support clients in accepting the “new realities” of the job market. As every career practitioner knows, the days of the college-graduation-to-retirement job security have ended. However, many clients still have not accepted the fact that security cannot be found in a particular job, industry, or organization. We should actively work to dispel the myth of perpetual employment and educate clients in the new paradigm (multiple occupations in a lifetime)--one that bases career security on an individual’s skills, employability, and ability to make transitions. The work of Douglas T. Hall (1997) is especially relevant here.

LIVING THE HOLISTIC MESSAGE

In addition to professional development and using ILP as an approach in career counseling, we could describe many other applications if space allowed. In general, we might say a bit about the value of counselors **modeling** the components of ILP by “walking the talk.” In other words, counselors may find it difficult to coach clients in living balanced or holistic lives, creating gender equity in their homes, integrating multiculturalism, articulating what brings meaning to their lives, re-evaluating the need for material things, and learning to accept and even create change.

However, we cannot take a “do as I say and not as I do” approach and expect our holistic message to be heard. We need to ask ourselves what the relevant elements of our daily lives communicate to our clients and communities and, where applicable, bring those elements into a healthier balance. We would like to conclude with two relevant comments from college students



who learned ILP’s lessons in a psychology course:

“I have to admit that I have had a pretty selfish view of career planning. I tend to ask, What do I want to do with my life?” and not “What does the world need of my life?”

“I was fascinated with the idea of what might happen if career counselors and other professionals begin to encourage others to take on this holistic view in the preparation of future goals and plans. Wouldn’t it be inspiring to know individuals were being counseled to better society with their lives instead of just bettering themselves?”

REFERENCES

(For a complete reference list, contact Dr. Hansen)

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