Connecting Career Counselling and Human Resource Development in Enterprises for Higher Education and Training in Practice (CONNECT!)

CULTURE AND CAREERS

Unit 5 - Learning Session 3

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Culture is defined as the set of beliefs and values that shape the customs, norms, and practices of groups of people, and help them solve the problems of everyday life. ***Thus, it is of no surprise that culture influences the way people work, the way they make decisions about work, how their career paths are shaped, as well as the way with which they communicate. In other words, culture shapes individuals' identities and the context in which they work.*** All individuals have a cultural, ethnic, and/or racial heritage, and in some cases, individuals have multiple cultural identities that shape their experiences. For example, the cultural context for an African American woman who lives in the southern United States will be based on her race, gender, and geographic location. The cultural context in which she lives helps to determine her own and others' career expectations, her preparation for work, and the opportunities open to her.

For more than three decades, researchers have examined various factors that contribute to the big differences across racial groups in the types of work chosen and the progress in those careers. Since there are no differences in ability patterns across groups, psychologists have focused on other factors that may lead to differences in occupational choice, such as career dreams, role models, work values, or interests in careers. More recently, researchers have examined possible reasons in one's environment that may contribute to those differences, such as racism and discrimination.

Culture influences careers in a number of ways. Since individuals work within a context shaped by the culture of the organization and the individuals within that organization, culture influences the type of work that is done, the rewards for various types of work, and the types of interaction that are valued. ***In other words, cultural values shape our perspectives of the importance of work and the type of work that is valued.*** Cultural values shape, not only the decisions made by organizations and within the workplace, but also the career and work decisions made by individuals. For example, individuals who place a very high value on family and the collective good of their racial or ethnic groups may make different choices than those who place a high value on individual achievement.

The cultural context for the majority cultural group includes several assumptions about work. It is assumed, for example, that work decisions are made solely by individuals, without consultation from others. It is also assumed that individuals are affluent enough to have the resources to seek opportunities to prepare for work and that the work opportunities are available and open to everyone. Finally, it is assumed that the career development process is logical and rational and occurs in a linear, step-by-step fashion. However, many of these fundamental assumptions do not apply to individuals who are from racial/ethnic minority groups. In many cultures, the role of family is viewed as being important in decision making, and racial/ethnic groups differ in the availability of resources open to them. Work opportunities are often closed to racial/ethnic minority groups due to racism, and consequently the career development process is often not linear or rational.

Culture very clearly shapes the opportunities available to individuals. A review of the demographic diversity of occupations indicates that members of racial/ethnic minority groups are overrepresented in some occupations and underrepresented in others. Thus, it may be that for some, career and work decisions are a result of a compromise between occupations available to them and what they really hope or want to do. This suggests that culture may interact with work and career in two ways. ***First, culture helps to influence individuals' views of what types of work are appropriate and of the role of work in their lives. Second, culture influences the types of work available to individuals***, both for positive reasons (e.g., opportunities available to those in a family business) as well as negative reasons (e.g., racism preventing someone from being hired into a work setting). Cultural values, the demographic diversity of work, and the role of interests, dreams, and barriers to work are all explored more fully in the next sections.

1. Cultural Values and Work

Cultural groups have been found to differ on a number of variables, though most researchers discuss five major dimensions on which differences in cultural values influence career and work. ***The first dimension is that of individualism versus collectivism.*** Those who value individualism prefer working alone, avoid dependence on others, and prefer accountability as an individual. They tend to place a high value on competition. Their work goal is to maximize material wealth and well-being. Conversely, those who value collectivism prefer working as part of a group, subordinate their own goals for achievement to that of the group, and place a high value on group success and cooperation. European Americans tend to be high on individualism, while most members of racial/ethnic minority groups prefer collectivism.

Another dimension in which cultures differ is in ***their views of the purpose of work in individuals' lives***. Some cultural groups prefer doing and achieving through work, and others prefer to work so that they can do other things. For the latter, who work to live, work is something to be tolerated to get to the "real" or "important" things in life. The former, who live to work, place a high value on work as a worthy end in and of itself; European Americans tend to value living to work. For many members of racial/ethnic minority groups, however, the role of work is less central in life.

A third cultural value is ***how much people believe they can control or shape their surroundings and how much they believe that life and consequences are predetermined.*** This has been referred to as locus of control: Is the control within the individual (internal locus of control), or is it shaped by forces outside the individual (external locus of control)? Those with an internal locus of control tend to be more aggressive in achieving their own plans and also tend to be more optimistic about achieving those plans than those with an external locus of control, who tend to be more passive and accepting of fate. Research has found that European Americans tend to be higher in internal locus of control, and racial/ethnic minority group members tend to be higher in external locus of control. It is important to point out that often the circumstances of lives affected by racism and discrimination are, indeed, out of individuals' control.

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A fourth dimension is that of avoidance of uncertainty. Cultures differ in how comfortable individuals are with ambiguity and unfamiliar tasks and how much risk is tolerable. Those high in uncertainty avoidance prefer highly structured environments and place a high value on individuals' conformance to rules and established norms. When rules are broken, a typical response is a high level of anxiety. Individuals' roles as women or men or as an elder or younger member of society are specified very clearly, and all members of the cultural group know what to expect from the behaviours of others. The rules for behaviours and relationships are clear, and conflict is avoided when possible. Cultures with low uncertainty avoidance have a much higher tolerance for outside-the-norm ideas and experimentation. Cultural groups with long ties to Catholicism tend to be higher in uncertainty avoidance, as are Asian cultures. Native Americans and African Americans tend to be lower in uncertainty avoidance, and European Americans tend to be in the mid-range on uncertainty avoidance.

Finally, the fifth dimension focuses on *differences across cultural groups in the way that time is perceived*. Those who focus on the past place an emphasis on the traditional way of doing things; the future is an extension of the past. Asian Americans tend to have a strong sense of past traditions. Those with present-time orientations place an emphasis on spontaneity and living for the moment, and this orientation is more typical of African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos. The last orientation, that of emphasizing the future, has a focus on future goals, and individuals with this emphasis are willing to make sacrifices for long-term goals. For those with future orientations, such as European Americans, time is viewed as a commodity to be "earned," "wasted," or "used."

2. Demographic Diversity of Work

While there is an increasing number of racial/ethnic group members in the United States, there are marked differences in educational and occupational attainment across groups. The 2003 census, for example, indicated that Asian Americans had the highest percentage of high school graduates (94 percent) by age 24, followed by Whites (86 percent), Blacks (81 percent), and Hispanics (65 percent). As might be expected, the levels of college graduation by age 29 mirrors this same pattern: 10 percent of Hispanics, 17 percent of Blacks, 28 percent of Whites, and 62 percent of Asian Americans had graduated from college by age 29. While these differences may seem striking, it is important to note that there is less disparity among racial/ethnic groups than ever; in 1940, the rate of high school graduation for African Americans was less than a third of that for Whites (7.7 percent vs. 26 percent), and the college graduation rate was similar (1.3 percent vs. 4.9 percent). Statistics are available only for African Americans and Whites during that time; data on Hispanics were not collected until the 1980s and on Asian Americans until the 1990s.

The differences in educational attainment may be due to a number of factors. *Whatever the cause of the educational disparity, however, it is clear that differences in education become magnified as employers require higher levels of education prior to employment, and with higher levels of education and employment come greater earnings.* This can lead to a vicious cycle in which individuals from higher income levels have access to greater opportunities and resources for education, which leads them to have more occupational

opportunities and income. They provide their children with more opportunities for education, and their children, in turn, have more occupational opportunities, and the disparity between groups grows. Recognition of this cycle has led a number of educational institutions to create specific programs to break this cycle and governmental programs to specifically address barriers that exist for racial/ethnic minority group members.

The increases in racial/ethnic diversity in the country discussed earlier have also resulted, as may be expected, in an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse workforce. A study by the National Research Council showed increases in diversity in almost all occupational groups, though diversity was broadly defined to include gender, race, age, and educational level and did not just specify race or ethnicity. When occupational groups are examined specifically for diversity in race or ethnicity, however, it is clear that racial/ethnic groups are not represented equally.

3. Culture and Career Development Theories

The differences discussed above indicate that the educational and occupational landscapes are not equal.

Culture, or membership in a racial/ethnic minority group, appears to result in different pathways to careers, career choices, earnings, and the opportunity to work. What is less clear, however, is how that disparity occurs. A number of career theories help explain and predict the types of careers individuals will choose (e.g., Holland's theory, social learning theory, social cognitive theory, and Super's career development theory). Most of these, however, were developed to explain the career behaviours of the majority culture and do not as adequately explain the career development of racial/ethnic minority individuals.

4. Aspirations, Interests, and Career Choice

As noted earlier, it is clear that there are differences in the occupations into which different racial/ethnic groups enter, though the reasons for that disparity in occupational representation are not as clear. Is it possible that there are differences in the dreams or interests that individuals may have? ***In other words, do the variations in choices made by individuals stem from their aspirations or work interests?*** Investigators who have examined differences in students' responses to "What do you want your career to be?" have found that there appear to be very few differences between racial/ethnic groups. In fact, most studies showed greater differences between men and women than between ethnic groups. Differences have also been found between those whose parents are of higher social class even within the same racial/ethnic group. ***Thus, people of different cultures do not necessarily have different career dreams, and we cannot conclude that differences in career choices can be explained by the differences in hopes and dreams for careers.***

Researchers have also examined whether differences in career choices can be explained by differences among groups in vocational (or work) interests. Interests may be viewed as a preference for an activity, and studies have been conducted to investigate whether culture affects the activities that different groups prefer. The research on vocational interests, for example, has found big differences between the interests of men and

women, which may give a partial explanation for the different careers that men and women pursue. However, most research has found that the differences in interests between cultural groups is relatively small and is much smaller than the differences within the same racial/ethnic group. For example, differences are greater between men and women of the same racial/ethnic group or between older and younger members of the same group than between groups.

Investigators have also found that the structure underlying interests is the same across groups, such that it is clear that the world of work is perceived in the same way across racial/ethnic groups. Studies have also shown that individuals appear to be basing their decisions on the same type of overall factors, though groups may weight those factors differently. In other words, while individuals from all racial/ethnic groups indicate that family is important in their career decision making, for some groups, family plays a much greater role in their decisions. It appears clear, then, that the differences in the occupational landscape are not a result of the interests expressed by individuals, by their career dreams, or by their incorporating different aspects in their decision making.

5. Barriers and Supports

Some researchers have examined the career dreams or interests of individuals, and others have focused more on the effects of racism and discrimination on the choices that are open to individuals. In other words, *they have focused less on whether the lack of equal racial/ethnic representation across occupations is due to individuals' choices and more on whether it is due to real (discrimination, racism) or perceived (perception of opportunities) barriers.* Similarly, some researchers have also focused on the various factors that help to facilitate the choices of racial/ethnic minority group members.

Some of the same researchers that asked about career dreams also asked students and their parents what careers they expected to enter. They found that although there were no differences in aspirations, there were differences across racial/ethnic groups in careers they expected to enter. Parents from different racial/ethnic groups also did not differ in the types of careers they hoped their children would choose, but when asked what they expected them to eventually do, the responses of parents from different racial/ethnic groups were quite different. Those differences seem to mirror the types of occupations held by racial/ethnic minority group members, suggesting that students expected to do the types of occupations they observed others of their racial/ethnic group doing. Thus, for example, African American students may not feel that the occupation of "engineer" is open to African Americans because they do not have role models of African American engineers, either in their families or in their communities.

Other researchers have examined supports for career and educational choices. In general, their studies have found that coming from a higher-income home, strong support from parents, exposure to programs that help to promote career exploration, and high expectations from parents and teachers facilitate educational and occupational attainment. Over the past two decades, schools have begun to develop programs both within the

curriculum and outside the school setting to provide additional support for students. Government policies that emphasize high expectations in education and equal opportunities in employment also serve as support for career and educational opportunities.

6. Conclusion

The role of culture in careers is complex, and researchers have only begun to study various factors that explain differences between groups. Career development theorists are being challenged to be more inclusive in their theories to incorporate the realities of individuals from various racial/ethnic groups. Clearly, something occurs between the dreams that racial/ethnic minority group students and their parents have for their careers and the actual occupations they enter. We know that cultural values may play a role in that difference between aspirations and expectations, but we also know that racial/ethnic groups differ in their perception of barriers to accomplishing their educational and occupational goals. It appears that these barriers are also part of the reality of making career choices and thus are part of the cultural context for many individuals.

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