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Broadening sources of Dignity and Affirmation in Work and Relationship

Angela Byars-Winston¹

¹University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA

Abstract

This article builds on assertions in Richardson's (2012, this issue) Major Contribution on counseling for work and relationship. In this reaction, I expand on the relevance and potential of the counseling for work and relationship perspective to enrich the field of counseling psychology. My comments focus on three considerations to further extend the cultural relevance of Richardson's work and relationship perspective: (1) broadening sources of dignity, (2) centering knowledge of marginalized communities, and (3) promoting psychologists' critical consciousness. Richardson's perspective holds great promise for being a guiding heuristic to inform counseling psychology research, theory, and practice.

Keywords

gender; social justice; training; vocational psychology

In her Major Contribution published in this issue of *The Counseling Psychologist*, Mary Sue Richardson articulated a provocative consideration of broader domains of work in her counseling for work and relationship perspective. She asserted that this new discourse emphasizing the significance of relationships and work in people's lives will better align vocational psychology with a 21st-century approach to life construction within which work and career development unfold. Central to Richardson's perspective is the emphasis she places on four major social contexts through which people construct their lives: market work, personal care work, personal relationships, and relationships based in market work. Her perspective provides language and conceptualization for counseling psychologists to deliberately attend to the value of two domains of work and two domains of relationships in clients' lives. In this reaction, I expand on the relevance and potential of the counseling for work and relationship perspective to enrich the field of counseling psychology. Specifically, my comments focus on three considerations to further extend the cultural relevance of Richardson's perspective: (1) broadening sources of dignity, (2) centering knowledge of marginalized communities, and (3) promoting psychologists' critical consciousness.

Broadening Sources of Dignity: Affirmation and Marginalization

Richardson's work expands the vocational discourse to address how people find value and importance in a nation with shrinking vocational opportunities and reward structures. Hostile and non-affirming workplaces, real and perceived exploitations of individuals' labor, and undervalued work itself may contribute to emotional detachment from market work.

Emotional detachment from market work may occur especially for those who experience persistent structural barriers like poverty and various forms of discrimination. For instance, individuals of African descent in the United States have historically had a precarious relationship to work. Moreover, systemic poverty and inequality have long existed for other ethnic groups and in economically depressed geographic areas like the Appalachian mountain region, southwestern Native American reservations, and the rural Mississippi Delta, limiting opportunities both to find and be affirmed by market work. Before this latest economic downturn, in 2008 Detroit had the highest poverty rate in the United States (33.8%) and about 48.5% of the city's males aged 20 to 64 without a job (Children's Health Fund, 2009). Thus, the presumed centrality of market work in individuals' lives is not universal perhaps owing to economic exploitation, discrimination, or cultural values that influence the salience of contexts outside of the market work setting (Neville, Gysbers, Heppner, & Johnston, 2003).

Accordingly, some scholars (Griffith, 1980; Turner & Turner, 1995) have argued that a differential occupational opportunity structure exists for individuals in the United States. This differential structure influences how various minority groups, like visible racial/ethnic minorities, are socialized to work as well as the development of their work-related expectations, aspirations, behavior, and thus, their attachment to work. In fact, some research indicates that although racial groups do not differ in their career aspirations, racial/ethnic minority groups perceive more barriers to realizing their career dreams (Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005) challenging workplaces coupled with real constraints in the vocational opportunity structure results in vocational alienation for many people, inclusive of feelings of estrangement, disaffection, and distancing from market work as a significant or primary source of identity. These trends and social dynamics emphasize the importance of understanding the experiences of affirmation and marginalization of individuals and groups. Richardson (2012) offers one perspective from which to understand and broaden the sources of dignity and affirmation for individuals by valuing personal care work alongside market work, the latter which serves to affirm and dignify some but not all. Scholarship from self-affirmation theory may be useful in illustrating this point.

Self-affirmation theory

For nearly 50 years, psychological theories have investigated how ego-based needs for positive *and* efficacious self-image are met (cf, Festinger, 1957). The underlying assumption is that individuals are motivated to protect a positive self-image. Simply put, human beings are compelled to reduce or avoid negative reflections on the self, these negative self-reflections being experienced as dissonance. When self-threatening experiences and information are encountered and psychological dissonance is subsequently aroused, thoughts and actions that affirm important aspects of the self-concept might be elicited to reduce dissonance (Steele & Liu, 1983). Indeed, experimental studies by Steele et al. (Steele, 1999; Steele & Liu, 1983) demonstrated that when individuals who committed a dissonant act (e.g., college students writing an argument to support a substantial student tuition increase) were allowed to affirm an important personal value, they were able to tolerate the inconsistency of the act.

Furthermore, affirmational resources have been shown to help maintain and sustain integrity of self-image (cf, Steele, 1999). One implication from Richardson's (2012) perspective on counseling for work and relationships is that counseling psychologists might be more attuned to identify ways in which clients experience and reduce dissonance in work and relationships. When contexts and relationships inconsistent with their ego threaten its functioning, individuals may use alternative sources of self-integrity to affirm themselves. An individual may change his or her dissonant thoughts (e.g., reduce its importance), seek to directly soothe unpleasant feelings (e.g., use illicit drugs), misattribute the unpleasantness

experienced to other sources, or engage in self-affirming thoughts or activities. The latter may include activities like therapy, use of social supports and friends, or prayer, all of which may diminish the effects of stressors. These strategies allow individuals to retain a self-view as being good, powerful, and stable. Self-affirmation, in which individuals affirm and reflect on their personal values, has been linked to resilience and has been found to reduce aggression in adolescents, diminish effects of personal threats on prejudicial attitudes toward other ethnic groups, and decrease the rise in Cortisol levels following stressful situations (Creswell et al., 2005; Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2007; Thomaes, Bushman, de Castro, Cohen, & Denissen, 2009).

Consider the following hypothetical sentiments: “Although I don’t like my work and I feel disrespected by my co-workers, I am a valued leader in my place of worship (e.g., temple, church, synagogue, mosque), which proves that I am important person.” Individuals expressing such sentiments experience more affirmation outside of market work and understandably may, in turn, exert more effort and dedicate more time in those religious and community contexts and with those relevant relationships that esteem them, perhaps to better cope with non-affirming market work domains. Self-affirmation theory is consistent with Richardson’s (2012) counseling for work and relationship perspective as it encourages psychologists to deliberately attend to alternate affirmation resources in clients’ lives.

Practice and research considerations

Psychologists might find it useful to graph the relative experience of clients’ affirmation and marginalization in the four major social contexts. Figure 1 depicts two visuals of Richardson’s (2012) four social contexts represented with the degree of affirmation and/or marginalization one experiences in each context. Similar to the Johari Window model of interpersonal awareness, the first visual illustrates an individual who might be experiencing the four major social contexts in a fairly balanced way. It is in the disproportionate size of each of the contexts that notable lack of affirmation (smaller boxes) or affirmation (larger boxes) might be explored with clients. Accordingly, the second visual illustrates an individual who experiences relative lack of affirmation and marginalization in market work and personal care work and relative affirmation in the personal and market relationship domains. The second visual is based on one of my family members’ work and relationships (with her permission). She is a widowed, African American woman in her early 50s, the mother of two adult children and a grandmother, and she works as a housekeeping supervisor in the hotel service industry. She is aware of the devalued status she experiences personally and socially in her field despite having very positive and rewarding relationships with her staff, who are comprised largely of other working-class women of color whom she describes as good friends. Work serves a pragmatic role in that she is financially independent, and intermittently it provides recognition of her leadership (e.g., bonus pay for efficient staff). Yet the majority of her affirmation comes from personal relationships that she struggles to maintain and nurture while she also cares for two dependent and ailing elder family members.

Not only may such visuals as offered in Figure 1 be useful in directing individual client interventions, but if counseling psychologists observe patterns of disparity and unequal affirmation across the four social contexts in their clients’ lives, such patterns may direct professionals to domains ripe for systemic interventions. Awareness of patterns of unequal affirmation across clients may be especially informative to intervention planning given the collectivist cultures of some ethnic groups. For instance, research supports that relevant group identity and group affirmations are positively associated with building resilience in response to group threat (see Sherman, Kinias, Major, Kim, & Prenovost, 2007, for further discussion). It is, therefore, important to consider affirmational views of not only clients’ personal self (“I-self”) but their collective self (“we-self”) (Heine & Lehman, 1997). Finally,

self-affirmation theory related to Richardson's (2012) perspective invites research questions such as: How and in what ways does affirmation occur in the four major domains? Does this vary across cultural groups? What work (market and personal care) and relationship (personal and market-based) domains affirm individuals? How do market-place relationships operate to include or exclude various groups?

Centering Knowledge of Marginalized Communities in Work and Relationships

Richardson (2012) stated that feminist values undergird her articulation of work and relationships, prioritizing those values and gender as two significant factors in her perspective. Yet the fact that market work includes discriminatory social systems and practices for many men and women from various cultural groups encourages a moving away from not only androcentric views of work and relationships but also ethnocentric views of these domains. Richardson noted several cultural groups that would benefit from a revaluation of personal care work, including individuals who are actively parenting, who are in late middle life, and individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT). She also highlighted the importance of untangling individual *and* cultural variation in client behavior such as expressions of agentic action. To aid in such "untangling" of cultural variations, I suggest that a critical multicultural vantage point is needed to reconstruct disciplinary (e.g., vocational psychology) knowledge previously held and based on exclusionary paradigms of dominant groups (Byars-Winston et al., 2004).

A critical multicultural vantage point would centralize the knowledge and experiences related to work and relationships of traditionally marginalized groups often understudied in vocational psychology, including racial/ethnic minorities, LGBT persons, and people who are economically poor or working class. "Shifting the center" of our knowledge construction illuminates the experiences of both oppressed as well as dominant groups, integrating personal narratives to understand how social structures, identities, power, and privilege have shaped our collective experiences and, thus, social science disciplines (Andersen & Collins, 2001). Just as Richardson (2012) advocated to bring personal care work from the margins to the center, I advocate to centralize the knowledge from more culturally diverse groups within her perspective.

For example, much of the discourse surrounding workplace gender equity begins with the women's movement at the turn of the 20th century, which centers on White/European/Caucasian constructions of women's roles and the (de-) valuation of women's personal care work, like mothering. However, women from other ethnocultural groups, such as African American women, historically have successfully navigated work inside and outside of the home, maintained and preserved relationships, as well as provided community service. One direct result of slavery was that the lack of gender-based division of labor (e.g., African American men were also house servants and African American women were also field laborers) translated into "egalitarianism characterizing their social relations" (Davis, 1981, p. 18). Dill (1994) noted that because "Black men were denied the male resources of a patriarchal society," they were therefore "unable to turn gender distinctions into female subordination, even if that had been their desire" (p. 154). Consequently, many African American women in the United States have developmentally integrated characteristics and roles typically viewed as male, such as achievement, autonomy, and independence, with characteristics and roles typically viewed as female, such as nurturer and caretaker (Turner, 1997). Thus, they may experience the interface and negotiation of personal care work and market work and relationships in unique ways. The assertions Richardson (2012) made would be strengthened by a greater understanding of how work and relationships operate across diverse cultural groups.

Nonetheless, Richardson (2012) invites psychologists to consider not just various domains of relationships (personal and market based) but also the varying forms of relationships through which people construct their lives. These forms may include community, kinship, civic, religious, and spiritual relationships in which women and men function and create new institutions and social structures through which to seek autonomy, gain a sense of personal validation and significance, and experience authentic mattering to others. For many ethnocultural groups, relationships outside of market work domains serve as psychological and social resources that counterbalance non-affirming market-based work and relationships.

Instead of work being the context in which affirmation, dignity, and prestige were sought after for African Americans and Latino/as, for instance, public participation and volunteerism in their community became the vehicles through which social standing, prominence, and social regard were achieved. “Working for the race” through community work and community organizations are often significant means by which women of color seek to advance an “oppressed public family” (Gilkes, 1991). For example, many people can identify the social and community significance of Rosa Parks in the civil rights movement in the 1950s or the civil rights work of Dolores Huerta, who co-founded the National Farm Workers Association in 1962. But few may know that Dolores Huerta was a school teacher or that Rosa Parks ended high school before completing her degree to care for her ailing grandmother and later for her mother (she eventually earned a high school diploma at her husband’s urging). Both individuals illustrate the importance of valuing personal care work and personal relationships, especially in community and civic forms, in addition to market work in people’s lives as articulated by Richardson (2012).

Practice and research considerations

Personal (and market-based) relationships serve purpose beyond providing interpersonal grounding, connectedness, and social support. It is in connectedness and relationship that agency and resistance are also evident. The novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, authored by Gloria Naylor, powerfully depicts the notion of agency and resistance within the context of personal care relationships. In the story, African American women diverse in life space and stage and who live on a dead-end street named Brewster Place are challenged by various social structures resulting from race, gender, and class oppression. These structures are metaphorically represented by a wall at the end of their street that separates them from the rest of the community. The novel concludes with the Brewster Place women residents tearing down the wall in a final act of collective defiance. Personal (and market-based) relationships, like those illustrated in *The Women of Brewster Place*, may also be sources of tacit knowledge for cultural survival that may be intergenerationally transmitted. Joe and Miller (1994) found that American Indian women of the Tohono O’odham and Yaqui tribes resisted cultural assimilation in their children by promoting cultural heritage in relational and group contexts as a means for their children to cope with discrimination and poverty. There may be valuable knowledge and insight to be gained about agentic action by centering the knowledge of individuals and groups who have dealt with and confronted numerous “Brewster Places.”

Richardson (2012) extends to vocational psychology the Stone Center’s self-in-relation theory to restate that all individuals are relational beings who experience a primary need for connection with others and emotional joining (Jordan, 1997). Richardson draws counseling psychology’s attention to not only the relational contexts in which people live and work, but also their relational capabilities. Consideration of relational capabilities acknowledges that for both women and men authentic relatedness facilitates clarity about one’s own experience and that of others, thereby engendering a greater sense of vitality and capacity for further connection (Jordan). In this vein, research questions may follow such as: How are women

and men enhanced and empowered by relational processes across personal care work and market work domains? How do non-market work relationships contribute to market-work pursuits (e.g., family influences, community values), agentic action, and resilience, especially for cultural groups often understudied in counseling psychology research like racial/ethnic minority women and individuals of low socioeconomic status?

Promoting Psychologists' Critical Consciousness

Richardson (2012) invoked scholarship from Stone Center theorists and feminist standpoint theory as critical informants of her perspective. She then keenly applied that scholarship to interventions she suggested be used with clients to increase their critical consciousness about work and relationships and to motivate their agentic actions. Yet an articulation of critical consciousness development for psychologists is conspicuously absent in her article. The lack of an articulation of how privilege (and power) operates within Richardson's perspective is ironic given that the theoretical perspectives emanating from feminist standpoint theory and the Stone Center both emphasize the notion of positionality. Positionality can be understood as the importance of explicating the viewpoints articulated in a given discourse within the socio-cultural identities, experiences, and contexts of the one articulating them. Although Richardson graciously identified her positionalities early in her article and described ways in which to facilitate critical consciousness about market work for counseling psychology trainees and clients, there was no parallel discussion of how counseling psychologists might develop their critical consciousness about market work and their positionality.

Given the persistence of the meritocracy myth (assumptions that societal resources, such as education and work training opportunities, are distributed primarily on the basis of individual merit) in the United States, especially related to market work (see Byars-Winston, Kantamneni, & Mobley, in press), it would seem prudent for psychologists to critically reflect on their personal experience of privilege. Although much remains unknown about the impact of client *and* counselor cultural factors on counseling outcomes (M. J. Heppner & Heppner, 2003), the American Psychological Association's (APA, 2003) *Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists* provides a framework to help counselors gain awareness of themselves and of their clients as they strive to provide culture-centered practices. Following Richardson's articulation of the critical consciousness development for clients, how might counseling psychology educators, practitioners, and researchers engage in critical self-reflection to better serve clients and engage in social action to address systems change?

Practice and research considerations

Beyond gaining personal cultural awareness and cultural awareness of clients in preparation for counseling, it is critical that psychologists develop metacognitive awareness of their own cultural context and how their privilege may shape their view of clients' cultural context throughout the course of intervention. Byars-Winston and Fouad (2006) discussed the significance of counselors' cultural contexts in career interventions vis-à-vis the incorporation of multicultural metacognitions into clinical practice. They described how three processes involved in metacognitive awareness—planning, monitoring, and evaluating—may engender more critical consciousness of client data and the counseling relationship as they evolve. Psychologists may find it useful to reflect on questions that Byars-Winston and Fouad posed to facilitate reflection on counseling processes and outcomes. Additionally, it may also be helpful for psychologists to consider the advocacy implications of every activity in which they engage with clients, examining how one's professional work supports the social status quo versus reduces disparities (see Byars-Winston et al., in press). Future

research may investigate the relationship between psychologists' critical consciousness or metacognitive awareness and their effectiveness in counseling for work and relationship.

Conclusion

Richardson's Major Contribution (2012) is a call to humanize individuals, re-membering them to the significant others with whom and through whom they construct their lives, regardless of their market work status. Richardson emphasizes that market work may not meet an individual's needs, thus the importance of situating "work within a life" (Hansen, 1997). Her discussion sharply examines work in people's lives without the explicit and implicit hierarchical placement of work as the central source from which dignity and affirmation are presumed to come. This is consistent with counseling psychology's emphasis on advancing healthy models of human functioning, including healthy models of work. The comments made herein were offered to extend the cultural considerations and cultural relevance of Richardson's thoughtful treatise. Indeed, my reactions are a reflection of the depth of thought-provoking content that Richardson articulated in her article.

P. P. Heppner, Casas, Carter, and Stone (2000) asserted that one litmus test of a profession's usefulness lies in the degree to which it is successfully addressing pressing societal needs. One larger goal of vocational psychology includes reducing societal and structural barriers that limit access to and successful engagement in work across the lifespan. Yet, individual interventions in clients' lives to improve their life functioning are desired in the interim until more inclusive social policies and practices are advanced. Richardson's counseling for work and relationship perspective holds great promise to inform counseling psychology research, theory, and practice and to strengthen the field's relevance to 21st-century life-work experiences by valuing broader domains of social contexts through which people construct lives.

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Biography

Angela Byars-Winston is a Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of Medicine at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research examines social cognitive and cultural

influences on academic and career development, especially for racial and ethnic minorities and women in science, medicine, and engineering. Presently, she is examining the effect of research mentoring on undergraduate students' career outcomes in the biological/biomedical sciences and investigating factors that increase retention of women physicians in academic medicine.

Figure 1.
Richardson's Four Major Social Contexts