Applying Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Young Adults

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Incorporating J. D. Krumboltz's (1979) social learning theory of career decision making, the author explores career development issues for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) adolescents and young adults. Unique challenges for the GLBTQ population are discussed, specific recommendations for effective career counseling with this population are outlined, and suggestions for future research are presented.

It is generally accepted that approximately 10% of people are gay or lesbian (Voeller, 1990). With the population of the United States recently reaching 300 million (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2007), this approximates 30 million or more Americans. More than 40 million Americans are 10 to 19 years old (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2008); thus, using the 10% approximation, more than 4 million adolescents and young adults may be predominately or exclusively homosexual. Recognizing that this figure does not include those who identify as bisexual, transgender, or questioning is essential. Even though in recent years people of differing sexual and gender orientations have been more widely visible and accepted, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) youth in particular face career decisions that are unique to the status quo.

Throughout the life span, GLBTQ individuals encounter issues that are significantly different from those faced by heterosexual individuals. Even in childhood, many GLBTQ youth, although perhaps not old enough to realize their sexual or gender orientations, may believe that they are different in some way (Ryan & Futterman, 2001). Particularly during adolescence, GLBTQ individuals may form negative self-perceptions, feel isolated, or face rejection, any of which may result in problems such as depression, shame, or low self-esteem (Travers & Paoletti, 1999). These emotional problems can result in drastic actions, such as substance abuse or even suicide, but may have more subtle effects, including social isolation or dropping out of school (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Grossman & Kerner, 1998). Moreover, the time, energy, and internal resources of

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managing a perceived marginalized status may affect vocational decision making (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006).

Literature focusing on career issues of GLBTQ individuals is limited, and few empirical studies have been conducted in this area (Degges-White & Shoffner, 2002; Pope, 1995). Although some authors have noted that the amount of research being conducted has been increasing (Pope et al., 2004), recent research has indicated that the career issues of GLBTQ individuals is an important area for continued professional focus, particularly concerning adolescents and young adults. Schmidt and Nilsson (2006), for example, in their study of 102 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth, tested Hetherington's (1991) *bottleneck hypothesis*. "According to the bottleneck hypothesis, LGB adolescents may be coping with the career tasks of their development at a slower pace than [are] individuals who are not negotiating a marginalized sexual identity" (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006, p. 25). Schmidt and Nilsson's study gave empirical support to the bottleneck hypothesis, thus suggesting that LGB youth can be distracted from typical career development tasks because of limited psychological energy being devoted to them. That is, particularly during adolescence, these individuals may put off, be unaware of, or deliberately forgo important career development activities because they are busy dealing with identity issues connected to their sexual orientations (Morrow, Gore, & Campbell, 1996). Schmidt and Nilsson noted that the converse may also be true in that some adolescents may put more psychological energy into career-related tasks and leave sexual identity development for a later time. Either way, career development implications exist. Clearly, more research and information is needed in terms of working with younger GLBTQ individuals and their career development.

With the emergence of an identifiable gay and lesbian culture in larger metropolitan areas, the negative stereotypes of effeminate gay men and masculine lesbian women are beginning to dissipate, and stereotypical career matches for gay men (e.g., hairdresser, waiter, flight attendant) and lesbians (e.g., gym teacher, truck driver, construction worker) are coming to an end (Pope et al., 2004). Although GLBTQ individuals are choosing a wider array of careers, issues continue to arise with career decisions that are unique to these individuals. Identity issues, fear of social acceptance, anticipated discomfort with work environments, and possibilities of significant discrimination may be present or arise and make for more difficult career development and decision-making processes. Moreover, facing the decision of making one's sexual orientation publicly known (hereinafter referred to as being "out") may be a major challenge both personally and professionally for many GLBTQ adolescents and young adults.

Morrow et al. (1996) noted the need for integrative models of career development because they apply to specific populations, and Chung (1995) discussed the need for theories to guide counselors' understanding of the career issues of LGB people. Understanding career development from a social learning standpoint can help counselors to conceptualize how many aspects of GLBTQ individuals' careers may develop and can provide counselors with information on how to assist GLBTQ individuals with career issues. I pose a theoretical approach aimed at understanding

GLBTQ career development to assist such individuals with these and related concerns. The approach is oriented toward GLBTQ adolescents and young adults and incorporates Krumboltz's (1979) social learning theory of career decision making (SLTCDM). Although many career theories have been applied to GLBTQ populations (Degges-White & Shoffner, 2002), Herring (2002) noted that SLTCDM is one of the broader models that may be applicable across various cultures. Furthermore, SLTCDM focuses on origins of career choice in terms of environmental conditions, events, and learning experiences that relate to career development (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). Whereas such factors indeed influence careers for people in general, they can be helpful in conceptualizing unique effects as they relate to GLBTQ individuals' career development.

SLTCDM's Four Factors in Relation to GLBTQ Individuals

SLTCDM considers four factors that influence individuals' career decision making: (a) genetic endowment and special abilities, (b) environmental conditions and events, (c) instrumental and associative learning experiences, and (d) task approach skills (Krumboltz, 1979). These factors are meant to help explain the origins of career choices and are not independent of each other because they interact in various ways (Krumboltz, 1979).

Genetic Endowment and Special Abilities

SLTCDM lists genetic endowment and special abilities such as gender, race, and physical appearance as the first factor thought to influence career decision making (Krumboltz, 1979). Because research exists that supports sexual orientation having a genetic predisposition (Lobaugh, Clements, Averill, & Olguin, 2006; Marmor, 1998), one can surmise that a person's sexual orientation is an inherent quality that will likely influence career decisions. For example, some GLBTQ individuals may have the capacity to view the world from the perspective of both male and female genders. In fact, Lobaugh et al. discussed several biological investigations comparing gay and lesbian individuals with heterosexual individuals. The investigators noted an overarching hypothesis that gay males may have feminine personality characteristics common to heterosexual females. In some careers (e.g., counseling, medicine, the arts), these characteristics can be viewed as an asset and may draw an individual to such occupations. In addition, some GLBTQ individuals may be able to relate to others who belong to minority or marginalized cultures (e.g., racial). GLBTQ individuals, like those belonging to other stigmatized groups, experience negative internalizations as well as adverse societal attitudes related to their sexual minority status (Meyer, 1995). These experiences may result in some GLBTQ individuals eschewing various careers (e.g., armed forces, politics, clergy) because of their perceptions of their inherent orientations or their beliefs about how others may perceive them. Pope et al. (2004), for example, specifically noted that employment discrimination continues to exist for this population

and that pursuing work at a religious or even governmental agency can pose significant risks for GLBTQ clients.

Environmental Conditions and Events

Perhaps the most significant factor in terms of career influence, environmental conditions and events including family traditions, geographical location, and legislation are described by SLTCDM as important in terms of shaping one's career choices (Krumboltz, 1979; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). Many conditions and events that are viewed as common for heterosexual individuals may affect GLBTQ individuals more intensely or create compounded issues for them. Whereas any person's family traditions may affect his or her career choices (e.g., a teenage boy decides to join the Air Force because his father had a successful military career), a GLBTQ individual making these choices may have added issues. For example, if this teen is GLBTQ, he may be forced to live a double life because of the current climate in the U.S. military. Furthermore, depending on his perceived or actual level of support from his family of origin, he may feel obligated to keep his identity secret to spare his family from embarrassment.

Geographical location also plays an important role, particularly in terms of whether a GLBTQ individual lives in an area of general acceptance or with an adequate GLBTQ population. Some areas of the country are commonly less hostile toward GLBTQ individuals and thus may attract these individuals to their areas (Rostosky & Riggle, 2002). Certainly, a GLBTQ youth raised in New York City, in which an active and thriving GLBTQ culture exists, is likely to develop a different worldview and distinct perceptions of some careers in comparison with a GLBTQ individual raised in a small town in the Midwest, in which much less visibility and acceptance of GLBTQ culture may exist. The GLBTQ individual in New York City may feel more comfortable pursuing a larger variety of careers because the culture is more in the mainstream and therefore less stigmatized. The individual in the small Midwest town, however, may limit career decisions on the basis of societal norms of typical gender roles or avoid, for example, careers that involve working with children or conservative corporations in which his or her sexual orientation may be an issue (Pope et al., 2004).

Legislation proves a significant factor as well, because the lifestyle associated with differing sexual orientations has legal ramifications in some areas and because laws and policies exist prohibiting common benefits such as health insurance and marriage licenses for GLBTQ individuals. Perhaps most prominent is the lack of protection from discrimination at work on the basis of sexual or gender orientation. Most states do not include either as a basis for protection in civil rights laws, and currently no federal law addressing them exists (Elliott & Bonauto, 2005). These issues are likely to be perceived as limits to career choices for GLBTQ individuals because of the potential need for same-sex partner benefits, fear of discrimination, and legal difficulties.

Instrumental and Associative Learning Experiences

Although learning experiences affect everyone to some extent, GLBTQ individuals may experience unique effects in many situations, including

career decisions, in comparison with those experienced by heterosexual individuals. For example, a GLBTQ teenage boy may attend a medical career fair with intentions of gaining information about nursing occupations. However, at the fair he learns that few men are employed as nurses and hears from his friend that "all male nurses are 'fags.'" This associative learning experience may result in the teen deciding that he will not pursue this career area because he fears being labeled or because he is not yet comfortable with his sexual orientation and the possibility of it becoming public. Conversely, the same teen, if more comfortable with his sexuality, may find this information advantageous in that he may expect to be more comfortable in this occupation and be surrounded by individuals with similar interests and qualities.

GLBTQ individuals can have unique circumstances surrounding instrumental learning experiences as well. These experiences are characterized by an individual's acts producing certain consequences and are unique from associative learning experiences in that they involve personal volition on the part of the learner (Krumboltz, 1979). For a young GLBTQ individual, this type of experience can have lasting effects and can influence career decision making to significant extents. For example, a GLBTQ teenage boy may be confronted by a family member or friend regarding his sexual orientation. Should the teen decide to be forthcoming about it (i.e., come out to that individual) and experience rejection, he may be more inclined to keep his sexual orientation a secret in educational and workplace settings and avoid careers or vocational situations in which he believes that being outed would be problematic. On the other hand, should he have a positive experience with the family member or friend, he may be more inclined to be open about his orientation and be accepting of careers in which this potential is less of an issue. As another example, consider a GLBTQ teenage girl contemplating writing an essay on GLBTQ issues for a class assignment. When suggesting the topic to her teacher, she may be told that this topic is not appropriate or acceptable for the assignment and, as a result, believe her decision to create this work has been negatively judged and discarded. The teen may subsequently avoid addressing or promoting GLBTQ issues in career decisions, which may in turn limit career options. Of course, should her decision to produce the work be accepted, the opposite may occur.

Task Approach Skills

Task approach skills include individual work habits, emotional and cognitive responses, and problem-solving skills (Krumboltz, 1979). If genetic endowment, environmental conditions, and learning experiences are considered as antecedents of sorts to task approach skills, GLBTQ individuals' approaches to tasks are likely to significantly differ from the approaches expected of heterosexual individuals. These differences in approach may be because of not only their cognitive and emotional experiences, but also their consideration of their genetic characteristics, special abilities, and environmental influences (Krumboltz, 1979; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). For example, a GLBTQ adolescent or young adult who is out may approach situations involving discrimination of a friend with more fervor (i.e., may be more inclined to do something)

than would a heterosexual person or a GLBTQ person who is not out. On the other hand, should the individual not be comfortable with his or her sexual orientation, he or she may choose to do nothing. Either way, the stage may be set for further similar behaviors (or lack of them), which may be applied to career decisions in many ways. For example, a GLBTQ individual may take an active approach and be more apt to confront discriminatory practices in an employment setting. On the other hand, an individual, although interested in a career that is not considered gender traditional, may take a passive approach and opt not to pursue it because of societal conformity. Another example correlated to task approach skills can be gleaned when considering the example of instrumental learning in which the GLBTQ teen comes out to a friend or family member and receives a positive response. This individual may be more inclined to use the same approach in a work setting on the basis of his experiences and be more willing to come out to his supervisor and coworkers. This approach may indeed serve a more personal objective but nonetheless has implications for career decisions.

The four factors of SLTCDM are thought to influence beliefs about self in terms of self-observation generalizations, task approach skills, and actions (Krumboltz, 1979). For GLBTQ adolescents and young adults, this influence may involve forming self-defeating generalizations regarding careers (e.g., believing they should not be teachers because of their GLBTQ orientations), developing worldviews that include anticipated oppression and discrimination in the workplace (e.g., fearing they will be fired if their orientations become known), taking significant caution in approaching many common career tasks (i.e., limiting career research to those believed to be gender-specific occupations), or taking improper action toward career exploration decisions (e.g., opting for a lower paying job with limited room for advancement solely on the basis of its location in a city with a large GLBTQ community). Furthermore, in light of the possibility that GLBTQ adolescents and young adults may veer from appropriate career development activities (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006), career counselors who are accepting and knowledgeable of GLBTQ issues being visible and available in communities and schools would be beneficial.

Recommendations for Counselors

To work effectively with the GLBTQ population, career counselors need to be knowledgeable of and appropriately address GLBTQ issues such as the coming-out process, minority status, cultural and family values, self-esteem, and identity confusion. However, as an initial step to working with this population, counselors must first consider its invisible minority status. Knowing whether clients are part of the GLBTQ community is impractical; therefore, counselors need to not only address clients with the appropriate openness and sensitivity but also communicate to clients their acceptance of diversity in a GLBTQ sense. Beyond providing comfort for a GLBTQ youth who is out, these practices can help to increase the confidence of those who are not out to use counseling services. Thus, opportunities are created to foster positive environmental conditions and associative learning experiences for individuals, which may greatly influence not only their

views of counseling but also their subsequent career decisions. Research has supported the need for these appropriate counseling environments for GLBTQ young adults. For example, Nauta, Saucier, and Woodard (2001) found that LGB students perceived less support and guidance from others in their academic and career decision making in comparison with the support perceived by heterosexual students. Moreover, as Bieschke and Matthews (1996) noted, many LGB clients may choose not to come out to counselors on the basis of how they perceive the counselors' openness or the organization's climate in terms of acceptance.

Suggestions for this initial focus come in the form of simple advertising. For example, placing a "Safe Zone" sign outside a counselor's office, indicating that the environment is free of prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination for all individuals regardless of sexual or gender orientation, is advisable. In addition, advertising in accessible GLBTQ publications and Web sites such as the *Gayellow Pages* (Green, 2007); local, state, or national GLBTQ magazines or newsletters; or GLBTQ-friendly Web sites (e.g., http://www.outforwork.org/) will convey an important message to the masses. In schools, GLBTQ sensitivity can be part of the counseling program's advertising on bulletin boards, in flyers, and in newsletters. In the office setting, having career resources that are conducive to the GLBTQ community available and visible would be helpful as well. Provision of such information may suggest options that the client may not have explored (Pope et al., 2004). Resources may include GLBTQ interest information such as literature from the Human Rights Campaign, the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, or postings from employers and educational institutes that have affirmative recruitment and tolerance policies. The creation of these GLBTQ-friendly environmental conditions can pave the way to positive events for GLBTQ individuals in terms of their feelings toward their orientation, others' acceptance of it, and its prevalence in the community. Furthermore, creating these conditions may help validate the genetic endowments of the individuals, which can promote normalization.

Considering the role of other cultural variables in addition to and in conjunction with sexual and gender orientation in the career development of GLBTQ individuals is essential. Gender, in particular, can have significant implications. For example, many young lesbian or bisexual women may have the perception that particular career opportunities (e.g., those involving physical labor) are gender specific to men and thus may discount such careers as options. In fact, research has shown that women have consistently been noted to report lower levels of self-efficacy when considering traditionally male-dominated domains (Williams & Subich, 2006). Exploring gender issues and how they interplay with career beliefs in conjunction with sexual orientation can be beneficial in these instances. Furthermore, individuals' race, ethnicity, or disability status may need to be considered. For example, in addition to the potential for dual marginalization, many GLBTQ individuals belonging to minority racial or ethnic groups (e.g., African American, Latino American, Asian American, Native American) have to deal with increasingly negative views toward differing sexual orientations in comparison with those faced by individuals belonging to the majority culture (Fukuyama & Ferguson,

2000). This situation may have implications in terms of lower levels of self-disclosure, increased feelings of stigmatization, and added career difficulties because of increased fears of discrimination. Processing these or related issues in conjunction with sexual and gender orientation may be crucial for optimal career planning. Similar issues may be encountered by many GLBTQ individuals with disabilities, whose career beliefs, interests, and decisions may already be significantly affected by their disability status. In addition to significant unemployment and underemployment rates, research has indicated that several factors exist that affect individuals with disabilities in terms of the career development process, including self-esteem issues, family involvement, limited vocational information, and limited decision-making opportunities and abilities (Yanchak, Lease, & Strauser, 2005). Understanding these individuals not only as part of a GLBTQ community but also as individuals within a disability culture may enable counselors to better gauge how to approach career development issues with them.

Including in initial assessments items that adequately address issues significant to the career development of GLBTQ individuals is important as well. Morrow et al. (1996) suggested that addressing the role of sexual orientation in the workplace may not only aid in understanding individual career choices but also have a role in career satisfaction. Furthermore, a need exists for expanding or developing new career assessments that incorporate the common concerns and unique issues faced by sexual minority groups (Chung, 1995). In addition to demographic, social, cultural, interest, ability, value, educational, and vocational background information, assessing factors such as perceived importance of separating personal and professional roles, comfort in working with a variety of individuals, interest in working for entities that have tolerance and discrimination policies, and targeted geographical locations would be helpful. Collecting similar information can prove to be just as or more useful than results of standardized tests. Assessing these factors can assist in determining how individuals may feel in particular work environments and, if unaddressed, can potentially limit the career options of GLBTQ individuals. In addition, assessment of comfort level with disclosure (coming out) may be helpful for some clients, as would the identification of personal and other resources available for managing potential negative reactions associated with this activity (Rostosky & Riggle, 2002). Assessing these factors can aid counselors not only with attitudinal information but also with information about task approach skills of GLBTQ clients that may be applied to the career development process.

Implications for Counselors

Considering GLBTQ career development from a social learning point of view, creating GLBTQ-friendly environments, considering other cultural variables in conjunction with sexual and gender orientation, and providing appropriate assessments can assist counselors with helping GLBTQ clients make specific career decisions beyond simply choosing an interesting occupation. Hetherington, Hillerbrand, and Etringer (1989) discussed the assumption of career development assistance being one of the most constructive ways that counselors can help LGB clients

improve their quality of life. Nauta et al.'s (2001) work supported this notion and suggested that focusing on emotional support and guidance when working with this population may be especially important. GLBTQ clients, especially adolescents and young adults, have unique needs when facing career development issues. These individuals are likely in the prime of their vocational development and need knowledgeable, competent, and empathetic counselors to provide quality services to them. Such services may influence the rest of their lives. Therefore, counselors should consider incorporating these approaches in their counseling as an avenue for working effectively with this population.

Whereas many counselors already have abilities, experience, and skills conducive to understanding and working with GLBTQ individuals and their career issues, many may not be in a good position to work well with this population. Therefore, in considering this population's potential for invisibility, all counselors should become familiar with GLBTQ culture beyond learning typical characteristic information that may be provided in counseling literature and should strive to interact with GLBTQ individuals on a community as well as professional level. These activities can serve as further instrumental and associative learning experiences for counselors, which will likely resulting in better understanding of differing worldviews among GLBTQ individuals, more positive experiences with them, and increased cultural competence in working with this population. Subsequently, the task approach skills of counselors (in terms of their work habits, emotional and cognitive responses, and problem-solving skills) toward working with this population may become more appropriate via these experiences. Familiarization and access to resources for GLBTQ individuals with career issues are essential as well. Examples are GLBTQ Web sites (e.g., http://www.outforwork.org/), local GLBTQ community groups (e.g., a campus or community alliance for GLBTQ individuals), networks of employers and educational institutions with affirmative GLBTQ recruitment policies (see OUT for Work, n.d.), and professional counseling organizations such as the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (n.d.), which are geared toward increasing awareness and competencies with GLBTQ issues.

Additional research needs to be conducted regarding the career decision-making processes of GLBTQ adolescents and young adults. Comparative studies, such as those conducted by Schmidt and Nilsson (2006), should be implemented to glean more information regarding the career decision-making skills and behaviors of GLBTQ individuals so that steps may be taken toward ensuring normalizing approaches. Comparative studies between GLBTQ and heterosexual groups should avoid implicit or explicit implications that heterosexuality is the norm or standard and should not be used to stereotype clients (Chung, 1995). Furthermore, the profession would benefit from investigating the effects of having GLBTQ-friendly environments on GLBTQ clients' use of career counseling services. Surveys can be conducted with counselors who promote such environments and those who do not in an effort to compare service use frequency and outcomes for GLBTQ individuals. Finally, the profession needs to ensure that counselors are practicing appropriate and diverse career counseling with GLBTQ adolescents

and young adults. This involves practitioners and counselor educators remaining up to date on GLBTQ cultural issues and on current research involving the population.

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