

## **C. H. Patterson on Client-Centered Career Counseling: An Interview**

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C. H. Patterson discusses career counseling as it can be accomplished within the client-centered approach. He notes the importance of the core conditions, the relationship of career counseling to therapy, the difficulty of counselor or therapist role change, the use of interpretation of tests, and the role of the client in the process. Included at the end of this article is a list of relevant publications authored by C. H. Patterson.

C. H. Patterson has long been identified with client-centered or person-centered career counseling. During his years at the University of Illinois (1956-1977), he developed and taught courses on occupations and on the use of tests in counseling. He contributed the chapter "Counseling: Self Clarification and the Helping Relationship" to the volume *Man in a World at Work* (Borow, 1964) commemorating the 50th anniversary of the National Vocational Guidance Association. Since his retirement in 1977, he has resided in Asheville, North Carolina, and since 1983 he has been distinguished visiting professor and distinguished adjunct professor (part-time) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNC-G). In the summer of 1985, he taught at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and in the spring of 1986, he was distinguished visiting professor at California State University at San Bernadino. This interview took place at UNC-G in the spring of 1988 and has been edited for publication.

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**Suzanne C. Freeman (S.C.F.):** *I would like you to discuss client-centered or person-centered counseling in the context of career counseling. Would you first describe the core conditions?*

**C.H.P.:** In effect, I would say that there are some basic core conditions for any kind of counseling or psychotherapy. Although career counseling is a specialty within counseling, you would not call it psychotherapy necessarily. There is a distinction between career counseling and career guidance. Arbuckle long ago (I don't remember where or when) said that career guidance is for people who are pretty normal and have no emotional problems that would interfere with developing a rational approach to making a vocational or career choice. Career counseling would be for people who have more of an emotional involvement or element in their personality that would interfere with a straight-forward, rational, logical, vocational choice. Now you can argue that nobody can make any choice on a purely rational or logical basis. There are always personal or emotional elements. So, it is not a sharp distinction, but I think you have to be aware that not everybody who comes

for career guidance or career counseling has emotional problems that you are going to have to deal with, but you should still be sensitive to them. You still need to think in terms of the core conditions of counseling, whether it is career counseling or not. The core conditions are the principles of any good relationship.

**S.C.F.:** *What are these principles?*

**C.H.P.:** First, you must understand your client. We call that empathic understanding in therapy because it is the kind of understanding that *differs* from what we usually talk about when we talk about understanding in science: the kind of perceptions you get from looking through telescopes and microscopes at something out there that is an object. What we are talking about concerning clients is the understanding from the internal frame of reference of the client. That is, we put ourselves inside the client to the greatest extent that we can, so that we see the world as he or she sees it. The basis for any decision, any kind of behavior, is the world as the client sees it, not the world as somebody else sees it. You can only respond to the world as you see it. That is the only reality--the reality that you see out there, not that somebody else sees. So this is basic. You have to understand the client. Where is she or he coming from? Second, you have to have respect for your client, not as someone who is poor and helpless, or just as someone who is an inadequate individual. This is a person. Because he or she is a person, you have to respect that person, regardless whether you might not like or respect certain *behaviors* of that person. It is the person not the behavior that you are focusing on. The terms "respect" or "warmth" have been used. The word that I like is "compassion"--you have to *care* about the client.

The third element is genuineness. This has been misunderstood by some people. They have taken genuineness to mean that it gives the counselor permission to do and say anything that comes to mind, "off the top of one's head." Now, that kind of response--without any thought at all about how it is going to affect your client--is not always therapeutic. It can be damaging to respond to other people without some self-censoring, or some thinking and reflecting. One would ask, "Is what I feel now, what I say, going to be helpful to this client, or is it going to hurt this client?" The purpose of counseling or therapy is not to make the counselor feel good or get things off his or her chest, but to help the client. So I always preface genuineness with therapeutic-therapeutic genuineness. That means whatever you say to your client is an honest response and not a facade. You are not playing a role; you are a real person with the client. These are the three characteristics of a good relationship.

**S.C.F.:** *Are these then the core conditions?*

**C.H.P.:** Yes and there is a fourth element. That is, concreteness or specificity rather than generality. Specificity is important because one thing that many counselors tend to do is generalize. They tend to interpret, for example. Interpretation is a generalization on a higher level. In counseling and therapy you need to stick to the actual specific ideas and behaviors that the client has communicated and not try to classify them and give them high sounding psychological terms or psychological textbook names. Such terms do not come from the client; in fact, they hinder the client because he or she thinks, "Oh, I've got a name for this now, and that's it; now what do I do?" Offering labels or terms stops or inhibits the process of continuing self-exploration, which is the major activity that the

client should be doing, and the major activity with which we should be concerned. The function of the counselor is to provide the core conditions; the function of the client is to engage in self-exploration. These conditions, attitudes, and behaviors on the part of the counselor facilitate client self-exploration.

In career counseling, it is important that clients do engage in self-exploration, in a spontaneous way, at their own rate, in their own way, without being constricted and forced to limit or explain themselves in the words of the counselor. So these conditions, then, are important in any kind of counseling relationship; they are important in vocational or career counseling.

**S.C.F.:** *How does career counseling differ from therapy or therapeutic counseling?*

**C.H.P.:** There are some differences in career counseling and personal or therapeutic counseling. In therapy, I maintain as others do, and as Rogers first proposed as a hypothesis in 1957 (and what is now supported by a considerable amount of research), that these conditions are not only necessary in a personal relationship, they are sufficient in a therapeutic relationship. They are sufficient to enable the client to engage in the self-exploration that leads to greater self-understanding, to decision making, and to making choices.

Now I have puzzled with this, as others have. Are these conditions always necessary and sufficient? When are they necessary and sufficient? When are they not sufficient? I have come to the conclusion that these conditions are necessary and sufficient except when the client is lacking in some basic information, understanding, or basic skills. These conditions are sufficient to enable the client to engage in productive behaviors if the client has the requisite information, knowledge, and skills. Some clients do not have these; for example, clients who cannot assert themselves. Counselors can help clients become more assertive through the counseling process, but sometimes they can be helped by taking some training or a course in assertiveness behavior. That is, teaching rather than counseling so the counselor may choose not to engage in this. And in career counseling, as another example, the client may come without an adequate understanding of his or her own aptitudes and abilities, without adequate information about the opportunities in the field-jobs, careers-the whole world of education and occupation.

You could argue, in cases such as I have mentioned, that the conditions of the relationship are necessary, but not sufficient to help the client engage in occupational or career exploration. Then the counselor may have to go beyond the core conditions. This is the problem. How do you go beyond the conditions? How much do you go beyond the core conditions? The point is that whatever you do, you remain in the frame of reference of the client-seeing things from his or her point of view, trying to understand what the client is telling you. Whatever you do, you maintain your respect and your caring for that client. And, it is your honest and genuine response.

**S.C.F.:** *So the counselor actively intervenes in some way?*

**C.H.P.:** You have to be more active, but you are not active in a directive, controlling way. This balance is difficult to achieve. You do it by leaving the choices to the client. In career counseling the counselor does not take responsibility away from the client, or does not use information about the client to lead or direct the client to a choice that the counselor thinks is desirable or appropriate. For one thing, clients know more about themselves than the counselor does. So there are many considerations entering into the client's choice that counselors are not aware of, no matter how well you know the client, no matter how long you listen. Clients cannot say everything that is going to affect their choices. So the counselor does not have adequate information to make the choice for the client. And, one can argue that counselors do not have the right to make choices or decisions for any other human being. So there is a theoretical or philosophical basis for not making their choices, or directing, or leading the person toward a choice that may seem appropriate to you.

**S.C.F.:** *How does the counselor help clients to obtain more information about interests and the world of work?*

**C.H.P.:** Well, the first principle is, to the greatest extent possible, get the clients themselves involved in obtaining the information, because it is more meaningful if they have to work at it than if someone just lays it on them.

And how do you use tests? For one thing, you do not do what many counseling centers or agencies do. They have a standard battery of tests. They say, "OK, you are going to take this test, that test, and this inventory." The tests are administered without the client having a choice.

The counselor uses those tests that are going to provide the kind of information that the client needs and wants. Now, the client does not have to say, "OK, I think I would like to take the Strong." The client does not know the names of the tests and inventories, but the client can tell you overtly or sometimes implicitly that, "I just don't know what interests me. I like this or that, but I don't know what really interests me." And you suggest, "Well, there are inventories that help you verify your interests or arrange interests in some kind of order. They are not going to tell you really what you don't know about yourself. They help clarify what you know about your interests. Some of the questions will help you sort out and think about your interests. Does it sound like something you would like to take?"

When it comes to aptitudes and abilities, mature clients often know pretty well what they can do with their hands or with their minds. But young, inexperienced clients, high school students, and sometimes college students, have not had the chance to test their abilities. Clients in some ways (while you are listening to them) tell you about themselves—they give the impression that what they are saying is that they are really not sure about their level of abilities. For example, a counselor might say, "You're not sure . . . you seem to like mechanics, but you don't know if you have enough ability to be a machine operator or a skilled machinist. We have some tests that might help you answer that question. Shall we schedule some of those tests?" This is the way you select the tests that clients seem to be

interested in or seem to want. They do not have to ask you for a particular test, but they are asking indirectly if you listen carefully to them.

**S.C.F.:** *How do you interpret test results to clients?*

**C.H.P.:** Counselors have some idea when they get the results of the tests and inventories whether clients, in some cases, are unrealistic about what they think about themselves ... their aptitudes and abilities. So you have to be aware of that kind of situation. If the client says, "Well, I think I did pretty well on this test," and the client is at the 30th percentile (on relevant norms), you know you are going to have problems. It is not just a matter of giving information that is going to be accepted. In a sense, any information about oneself has some affective, emotional implications. Sometimes the client doesn't believe a high score, particularly when the client has a low self-concept. Then you have to deal with it in a therapeutic way; and, the same if scores are lower. The client does not have a clear concept of his or her intelligence or abilities.

So you should present the results of the tests in a simple, clear way that the client can understand, in terms of percentiles, after explaining the nature and meaning of percentiles. For example: "You're above 90% of the population of college freshmen." You should include norms or profiles so the client can see. You present this objectively, without any judgment or evaluation, but the client is not necessarily going to see it objectively. You have to go slowly and pause and see what kind of reaction the client is having. Allow the client to respond, to disagree, and you should accept that. You say, "You didn't expect this," or "This is a surprise to you. This test isn't a perfect report, but it is accurate within these ranges. You may not be in the 30th percentile, but you are most likely between the 20th and 40th percentile. There can be a pretty broad range. This is not the perfect figure." You allow the client to react, to respond to the information, and you respond to the feelings the client has about it.

**S.C.F.:** *So you have to deal therapeutically with client feelings?*

**C.H.P.:** Yes. We have gone quickly over how the client is involved in the test selection process and what we call the test interpretation process. I prefer to talk about communicating the results of the test to the client. The next part of the process would be helping the client engage in some self-exploration of what these mean in terms of recognizing the client's level of functioning, focusing, and narrowing down the client's interests. But then the understanding of the information has to be achieved in the context of career opportunities, so the client has to engage in occupational exploration; the client has to know something about various occupations that are available. And, of course, in terms of the client's results on the interest, aptitude, and abilities tests, she or he has some idea of the appropriate career fields. So the client narrows down the choices, and then the client needs to explore those fields. As a counselor, you do not know and should not be expected to know all about all of these fields, so you cannot give a lecture on each of these fields. There are all kinds of sources of information, including computers. You help the client find the information. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (1988) is one of the simple beginning ones and the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (1977) is another. And, there are all kinds of materials on occupational information from the federal government. Any

counselor or organization that employs a career counselor should have resources available right on the premises; for example, a library where the client can go to read about careers of interest. The clients do this on their own. It is more accurate information than what has been sifted through the counselor. Besides reading about this information, the client may want to know about different jobs, so you suggest, "There are people who are associated with this occupation who will talk to you about this type of work. You can visit these places to discover how people work. Most people are very happy to talk about their jobs--love it sometimes." The client engages in the exploration by himself or herself. Such experience can then become a basis for further discussion with the counselor.

It is worth noting that it is perfectly permissible to give certain simple items of relevant information that the counselor knows. It can save a lot of effort on the part of the client. This is especially true when the information is not easily available. So this is the way the client begins to narrow down the field to get to a more specific job title.

The vocational decision does not have to be a lifetime decision. Many people change jobs. Sometimes they are lifetime choices, but they are not necessarily that. They may not last very long at all. Clients may go out into the world having made a tentative choice. Then sometimes within a month or two they have experiences that change things for them. So the counselor may say, "This seems to be what you're interested in doing. This seems to be the direction in which you can go. You may change your mind later. Things may change so you have to change your job or your career choice. This looks like the choice at this time." Throughout the process the locus of responsibility and control is being left to the client. The counselor has facilitated the process rather than direct it or lead it. The counselor has followed the client. I use the term "responsive." The counselor stays in the responsive mode; even in career counseling the counselor stays in the responsive mode. The counselor has not started out by asking a lot of questions, the client thinks, "Well, you are the expert, I'm going to sit here and wait for some more questions about where I'm supposed to go, and what I'm supposed to talk about." The client often comes in thinking you are the expert. Sometimes you have to start the process by what is called "structuring"--explaining what the counselor's role is, how he or she is going to function. Structuring also explains what the client's role is and how she or he is expected to function. In many cases, you do not have to structure specifically. You structure by the way you operate. It is a slower process. The client may not catch on. Then you have to structure more clearly.

**S.C.F.:** *What if the client digresses, or seems to overlook relevant aspects of career choice?*

**C.H.P.:** In career counseling there are many aspects of a client's life that are relevant, and, in effect, we want to be sure that clients consider all of the elements of their lives that might be relevant to this choice. That is, you want to focus clients on the problem of career choice rather than, say, whether or not they want to get married. Since you want the client to focus on this area, what often happens is that the counselor starts off the interview with a whole series of questions such as, "Now give me your occupation history ... now give me your educational history." That behavior classifies the counselor as the expert. The point is that the counselor does not need such information, because the counselor is not going to make the decision. The client needs the information, and the client has the information, but

what the counselor wants to do is help the client focus on it, to bring it out of the background into the foreground. Questions do this, but they also do other things that are undesirable, like putting the counselor in the driver's seat. One procedure I have used, and my students use, is to have a form that the client completes. Some of these are available commercially. I modified one to use when clients initially identified their problem as vocational. The client completes the form before seeing the counselor. It provides the counselor with identifying information and the background of the client for the record. The counselor might glance over this record, but is careful not to come to premature conclusions about what kind of person this client is. Also, the process of filling this out helps the client to review her or his past vocational and educational history, so that the information is there, in the foreground rather than in the background. I think this is helpful to focus the client on the relevant elements in vocational counseling.

**S.C.F.:** *What happens when a client's personal problems interact with career problems?*

**C.H.P.:** The problem that develops sometimes is that when clients, after discussing a vocational problem, go into personal problems, they may perceive the counselor as an expert, a source of information. They may ask for personality tests. I have never used personality tests for vocational or personal-counseling. You learn more about the personality of clients by listening to them. If a client asks me about personality tests, I suggest, "I don't think there are any personality tests that really tell you any more about yourself than we can find out by just talking about you."

Basically, the counselor as an understanding person is the commonality between therapy and career counseling. Still, the role is somewhat different, and in career counseling the client may perceive the counselor somewhat differently. This can create a problem when the counselor must move from the more active role of the career counselor-discussing test results, for example-to the purely facilitative role of the therapist. The difficulty of this move must not be underestimated.

**S.C.F.:** *What does the counselor do about this role change?*

**C.H.P.:** I do not know of any real solution to the problem. The counselor cannot separate personal and career issues usually-they may both come up in the same interview. The client may focus on the career choice and then in the next interview start on the personal problem. In effect, the client says, "I've settled that now, but I still have problems with this area." That makes it easier. You can structure by saying, "Well, now I am going to function a little differently. When we talked about vocations, I may have asked a few questions." One of my rules, for my students learning therapy, is never ask a question, except when you do not understand what the client is trying to say. Of course, that happens in career counseling also. When you do not understand what the client is saying, you ask a question. If you do question the client to secure information, you are cast as the expert. The client can think, "I'll answer all these questions, then I'll begin to get answers to my questions."

So there is this problem of changing roles. It has been a topic of concern for me for 40 years. I have not come to any real solution yet. Ideally, I often think it might be better for a

client to have two counselors. This has happened. Sometimes I tell my students to say to the client, "We will work on your vocational problems, but I think you should talk to somebody else about your personal problems." That is not always possible. Some may not understand that separation and may not want to separate the functions. It does involve the problem of the difference in roles. Otherwise, there is a struggle regarding this role change with clients who, I would say, need counseling rather than guidance--more counseling than career guidance. I know this is a real issue, because it is an issue that I have seen come up with the students I supervise.

I have not seen any recognition of this in the career development literature. There, the general approach is a kind of rational, logical, cognitive approach. There is recognition that emotions are involved in making career choices, but there is little written about how to deal with them. The process in most of the literature that I am familiar with is to present career choice as logical, cognitive, and rational. But as I think I have said earlier, there is no personal choice that anybody makes that is completely logical and rational. There are always feelings involved. It is important for the counselor to be sensitive to feelings when they are expressed by the client, and that the counselor deal with them and not gloss them over by saying, "Let's get on with vocational decision making." The counselor should stop and deal with the feelings that arise, in as therapeutic a way as possible.

**S.C.F.:** *Could you discuss the anxiety some counselors have about silence?*

**C.H.P.:** One of the reasons that counselors ask questions is because they do not know what else to do. They do not know what to do when the client does not take over right away and remains silent. Some of these uncomfortable feelings with silence can be attributed to the expectations of the client. Sometimes the client says, "Ask me some questions." Then the counselor can structure, saying, for example, "Well, the way I work, I don't ask questions. I want you to talk about whatever is on your mind--whatever you came here to talk about. Just tell me about yourself." This does not have to be a long introduction. Sometimes clients are uncomfortable with silences. The problem is that beginning counselors are more uncomfortable than clients and break the silence.

I emphasize that the counselor is in the responsive mode. The client is the initiator of the whole process and at every step of the process. Sometimes clients do not begin. If the client does not initiate after a long silence, it may be better not to continue a longer silence. It may be too uncomfortable for the client, even though the counselor says, "You don't need to talk, until you have something to say." Sometimes clients are too uncomfortable for that. So the counselor may ask a simple question, and the client says something. As soon as the client says something, you are able to respond, and the counselor should respond--not make a comment that is unrelated to what the client has said or ask another question. Whenever the client says something, the counselor has an opportunity to respond and should take advantage of that opportunity. Now the client may clam up again, so the counselor has to pause. One thing the counselor can do is to repeat the response in different ways or give a different response to the same thing, and see if the client will respond to that. If it is a simple statement and the counselor cannot respond to it in different ways, then she or he might ask a question that is somehow related to what the client has said.

If the client initiates once and the counselor responds, then the counselor may have to initiate and the client responds. When the counselor is doing the initiating, the counselor is out of the responsive mode. You do not want to get in the habit of that happening all of the time. But as long as the counselor can respond 50% of the time, there is a good possibility that the client will begin to take more and more of the initiative. That is a principle of behavior modification. It is not a very good ratio when the counselor can only respond about 50% of the time. However, it is certainly a lot better than when the counselor does not respond at all by starting out with and continuing with more questions. That is certainly going to teach the client to be the responder rather than the counselor being the responder.

There is a very simple question that I ask sometimes when I listen to an interview, and wonder whether it is counseling or some other kind of interview. I ask, "Who is responding to whom?" The ideal is to try to stay in the responsive mode 100% of the time. Then the client is the initiator 100% of the time and is developing control of the whole process.

**S.C.F.:** *Does the client always direct the process?*

**C.H.P.:** Always, if counseling is to be really successful and lead to decisions or choices that will be carried out or acted upon. Choices and decisions that come from the client rather than being directed from outside the client are his or her choices and decisions, and involve a commitment that is otherwise lacking. Client-centered counseling is always just that, in career counseling as well as in therapeutic counseling-the client is the center of the process, and the determiner of the content of the process and its outcome.

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