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## Awakening: Career Opportunities After the Storm

### Keywords

career, natural disasters, career counseling

# Awakening: Career Opportunities After the Storm

Deirdre J. Anderson-White and Melinda Gibbons

*Immediately following natural disasters, basic needs are provided; however, the long-term needs of individuals are neglected. The narrative approach (Brott, 2001; Cochran, 1997) to career counseling is offered as a method to assist survivors of natural disasters to tell their story and create new meaning related to their career paths.*

In 2008, the Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters (2009) reported an increase in the number of economic losses and deaths attributed to natural disasters compared with the annual numbers from 2000 through 2007. Natural disasters occur all over the world with global implications, and the Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters estimated that from 1980 to 2002, natural disasters took place in 73 nations. Many individuals are affected by the short-term and long-term devastation of natural disasters.

Humanitarian agencies, such as the American Red Cross (ARC; 2011), defined a natural disaster as “a calamitous event which suddenly and seriously inhibit the functioning of a community resulting in human, environmental, and economic losses which exceed the communities’ resources” (Introduction section). Most of these natural disasters create devastating effects on the lives of individuals (del Moral & Walker, 2007). Kahn (2005) reported that the budgets of humanitarian and emergency response agencies have significantly increased in anticipation of meeting the sizeable needs created by future disasters. Natural disasters affect all aspects of a survivor’s life. Because of the prevalence of natural disasters, man-made disasters, and catastrophic events, media outlets such as the television, radio, or the Internet frequently inform the public when a disaster occurs. As we wrote this article, several disasters occurred, including the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (ReliefWeb, 2010), and an earthquake and tsunami in Japan (U.S. Geological Survey, 2011). Regardless of whether the event is a natural disaster or a man-made disaster affecting nature, individuals, families, and entire communities have short-term and long-term changes as a result of these events (Cohan & Cole, 2002; Green, 1991; Kahn, 2005).

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Our purpose in this study is twofold: first, to explore the comprehensive and long-term impact of a natural disaster on vocationally displaced adults, and second, to explore the benefits of using the narrative career counseling approach (Brott, 2001; Cochran, 1997; Peavy, 1996) for future life planning for these survivors. The subsequent sections include information related to the population of adult survivors of natural disasters, followed by a review of short-term supports, vocational impact of natural disasters, theoretical approaches influencing the services provided to this population, and, finally, a case study that provides a model of using the narrative counseling approach with an adult natural disaster survivor.

## **ADULT DISASTER SURVIVORS**

Most of the literature related to the impact and subsequent recovery from natural disasters examines the impact of the disaster on children (Madrid & Grant, 2008; Tuicomepee & Romano, 2008), whereas other researchers focus on the mental health needs of individuals immediately following natural disasters (Cohan & Cole, 2002; Haskett, Scott, Nears, & Grimmert, 2008; Jones, Immel, Moore, & Hadder, 2008; Jordan, 2002; Levy, 2008). Few, however, focus on providing life planning (Peavy, 1996) to adult survivors of natural disasters 3 months to 1 year following the event.

### **Short- and Long-Term Supports**

When humanitarian agencies initially respond to a catastrophic event, immediate services are provided by first responders. First responders are people who live in the area (ARC, 2011), who balance their own needs and responsibilities while providing food, shelter, and clothing to other survivors (Haskett et al., 2008) and offering comfort to close family members (Terr, 1992). The primary focus of humanitarian agencies is the provision of basic needs for individuals by first responders (ARC, 2011; Haskett et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2008; Madrid & Grant, 2008). These first responders provide a vital service by addressing these immediate needs.

Researchers (Jones et al., 2008; Jordan, 2002; Madrid & Grant, 2008) examined crisis interventions provided to individuals following a natural disaster and noted the need to use psychological first aid with survivors (Haskett et al., 2008; Levy, 2008; Osofsky, 2008). According to Haskett et al. (2008), the model of psychological first aid includes the eight core actions of contact and engagement, comfort and safety, stabilization, information gathering, practical assistance, connection with social supports, information on coping, and linkage of collaborative supports. These tasks concentrate on the short-term psychological needs of disaster survivors by offering compassion, connection, and immediate support.

The immediate service delivery focuses on addressing basic human needs such as food, shelter, and clothing that are provided through crisis intervention and short-term approaches (Haskett et al., 2008; Levy, 2008). Both Haskett et al. (2008) and Levy (2008) reinforced the importance of reflective listening

when working with disaster survivors. Practitioners are encouraged to simply listen to the stories of disaster survivors as a way of providing therapeutic assistance (Levy, 2008). Active listening, in combination with providing basic safety needs, constitutes the primary portion of short-term service delivery. Many educational institutions and public health agencies are now addressing the anticipated needs created by these catastrophic events (ARC, 2011). The U.S. Department of Education (2007) has included longer term recovery information in its crisis planning guide for schools and communities. The ARC (2010) provided a section on their website focused on financial, educational, and vocational issues following a disaster, offering tips on whom to contact for assistance. Academic governing bodies and humanitarian agencies also responded to the call of the experts in the field of disaster management by modifying their current standards. For example, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) has modified their 2009 standards by adding crisis intervention training to the curriculum of their accredited programs. Crisis response agencies and training programs recognize the need to move beyond immediate assistance for disaster survivors by planning and developing long-term supports. Long-term support goals are providing permanent housing, vocational options, and community rebuilding.

### **Vocational Impact**

Whereas the end of human life represents the most significant loss related to natural disasters, the loss of property, investments, and livelihoods represents the second largest losses (del Moral & Walker, 2007). Several authors reviewed the recovery efforts following Hurricane Katrina and noted the fiscal impact of the loss and the destruction of homes in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region (Haskett et al., 2008; Levy, 2008; Osofsky, 2008). These authors also reported the slow pace of disaster recovery, inadequate job availability, and unavailable housing; some survivors equated standing in line for assistance as their new job (Haskett et al., 2008). Clearly, losses evolve over time, and longer term assistance is needed.

*Displacement.* Disasters often increase the likelihood of displacement for survivors (Appleseed Foundation, 2006). Displacement is defined as the “process of leaving one’s home when the home cannot be lived in any longer or is destroyed due to a disaster” (Houston et al., 2009, p. 1). As a result of natural disasters, individuals’ normal life activities are interrupted (Houston, Reyes, Pfefferbaum, & Wyche, 2010). This swift disruption can create change in individuals’ homes, jobs, schools, and communities (Dass-Brailsford, 2010) and subsequent uncertainty.

Although the initial impact of this disruption focuses on the immediate securing of basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing, the long-term effects can include stressful vocational decisions. According to the *Domestic Disaster Displacement Manual* (Houston et al., 2009), the needs of displaced workers vary greatly and should be considered on an individualized basis. Therefore, some

displaced workers may consider relocating for employment-seeking vocational opportunities (Clayton & Spletzer, 2006) that match their skill set or acquire additional education and training to secure gainful employment.

*Job loss.* The actual statistics related to lost jobs after Hurricane Katrina were staggering. Government agencies and researchers (Clayton & Spletzer, 2006; U.S. Department of Labor, 2006, 2007) examined the vocational impact of Hurricane Katrina on employment rates, unemployment rates, and wages. The U.S. Department of Labor (2007) reported alarming numbers, including 127,900 jobs lost a year after the storm, with the majority of these jobs lost from the industries of education, health services, hospitality and tourism, trade, transportation, and utilities. However, the largest job loss occurred in the hospitality and tourism industry. These catastrophic events created damages that prevented the hospitality industry from operating its hotels and resorts. Additionally, these events were too devastating to allow some industries to maintain their workforce following the natural disaster.

Clayton and Spletzer (2006) found that wages of displaced workers decreased following Hurricane Katrina. A current population survey report estimated that 1.5 million people from Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana left their homes as a result of Hurricane Katrina (Groen & Polivka, 2008). Most reported a loss in wages compared with their pre-Katrina income, and this loss of revenue can have an enormous impact on a person's ability to secure food, shelter, and clothing at this critical point following a natural disaster (Clayton & Spletzer, 2006). Before and after natural disasters, the individuals with fewer resources are more likely to have negative outcomes, such as significant property damage, job loss, and pay reduction.

A survey of disaster service case managers (Bell, Madden, Borah, Lein, & Beausoleil, 2010) found that housing, employment, and transportation were the most significant challenges faced by disaster survivors. They noted that housing was either unaffordable or in remote areas away from jobs, that many survivors previously relied on public transportation and had no way of getting to work after the disaster, and that workers lacked experience in the types of jobs available postdisaster. Overall, employment issues are high on the list of long-term challenges for disaster survivors.

*Low-income families.* Some researchers (Annan, 1999; Kahn, 2005; Thompson, 2010) suggested there is a link between poverty and the impact of natural disasters because areas with greater economic resources generally suffer less from disasters. For example, compare the 2010 Haitian 7.0 earthquake that resulted in 230,000 fatalities with the 1989 San Francisco Bay area earthquake that registered 6.9 on the Richter scale, which resulted in 63 fatalities. Essentially, a poor country and a wealthy country sustained similar natural disasters with vastly different outcomes (Thompson, 2010). Thompson (2010) noted that the difference in building codes and population density led to these different results. Differences in building integrity often directly correlate with the socioeconomic status of local residents.

Many factors influence the overall impact a natural disaster has on a community. Lack of jobs affects individuals' socioeconomic status and directly affects their ability

to provide their own basic needs. Kahn (2005) postulated that primarily the three factors of financial resources, geographical location, and a nation's resources affect the devastation resulting from a natural disaster. Additionally, Kahn identified the lack of resources and poverty as a barrier that can restrict and limit people from evacuation efforts from dangerous or risky areas; therefore, people with fewer resources have increased risk in a natural disaster. The former United Nations Secretary General Annan (1999) shed light on a possible correlation between poverty and exposure to risk in natural disasters, suggesting that the scarcity of resources strongly influences choices to live in dangerous areas such as flood zones, earthquake fault lines, or heavily inhabited areas. If a disaster occurs, these lower income residents are most negatively affected.

Kahn (2005) remarked on the impact of natural disasters on poverty stricken areas, noting more devastation because of the lack of preexisting resources. For example, the U.S. Department of Labor (2006) reported that a year before Hurricane Katrina, an estimated 110,080 jobs had already been lost in Louisiana. Essentially, 1 year before the storm the area had already been affected by significant job loss. A review of post-Hurricane Katrina employment (Zottarelli, 2008) revealed that residents from higher income families were more likely to find employment that was financially similar to their predisaster jobs than were people from low-income households. Prior economic conditions greatly affect the outcomes after a natural or man-made disaster.

Because of job loss, property loss, or even death, people experience devastation following a disaster (del Moral & Walker, 2007). Natural disasters disrupt the quality of life for individuals and their ability to live their lives to the fullest. According to Green (1991), a common theme disclosed in interviews with natural disaster survivors related to increased stress levels. The typical responses to natural disasters are communication problems and deep distress. Attewell (1999) reviewed statistics related to displaced workers and found that people without a college education have higher rates of displacement. Most displaced workers find new jobs within 3 months, but workers with less education are unemployed for longer periods. Also, displaced workers have lower self-esteem and a loss of their professional identities (Attewell, 1999). The disruptive nature of natural disasters influences the lives of survivors with the presence of stress, job loss, and property damage that subsequently involved the survivors' self-identity and self-esteem. Counselors can assist with long-term career and personal issues through the application of the narrative approach to career counseling.

## **CAREER COUNSELING FOR LONG-TERM ISSUES**

The narrative approach to career counseling provides a way to address the long-term needs of disaster survivors. Its multicultural and holistic perspective focuses on the use of storying to help clients with career-related issues identify how they can make meaning of their world (Brott, 2001). The narrative approach recognizes that individuals have their own construct or view of what is real for

them (Brott, 2001; Peavy, 1996). This perspective can be particularly salient for victims of a disaster, each of whom has a unique story to tell.

In narrative career counseling, counselors help clients focus on their personal narrative and how they make sense of their reality (Campbell & Unger, 2004). Client perspectives are typically based on their upbringing and on their interactions with others. Their viewpoint constantly changes as they interact with their environment, so it reflects their view of life at the current moment (Cochran, 1997). For example, disaster survivors would be encouraged to include their new reality, postdisaster, in their stories because the counselor would assume that life themes have been altered as a result of the experience.

Narrative and constructivist perspectives alter the scope of career counseling from an exclusive focus on career-related issues to a more holistic perspective, recognizing that all aspects of life are related to vocational challenges (Savickas, 2002; Swanson, 2002). This philosophical paradigm shift within career counseling addresses the relevancy of an individual's whole story, including but not solely focused on career-related issues. Again, disaster survivors could describe the career issues that resulted from the disaster but also include other life-affecting issues.

Brott (2001) proposed a three-step process for applying the narrative approach to career counseling. In coconstruction, counselors assist their clients in telling their stories. Often, a qualitative assessment such as a lifeline, career genogram, or life-space map (see Brott, 2004) is used to assist clients with this process. The goal of this first step is to gather information about the client and listen for themes that reflect personal meanings about life (Brott, 2001). It is important to note that success in this step is based on creating a trusting, accepting atmosphere that feels collaborative and safe for the client (Bujold, 2004). After potential themes have been identified, deconstruction begins. In deconstruction, counselors gently challenge clients to recognize the socially constructed nature of their meaning making (Campbell & Unger, 2004) and encourage consideration of alternative perspectives (Brott, 2001). When the client has recognized alternative meanings, the final stage of construction begins. In this stage, clients consider new possibilities and create future life chapters. They choose new ways of being and act on these new decisions (Brott, 2001). A hypothetical case example is provided to illustrate these concepts.

## CASE EXAMPLE

Richard is a single 24-year-old Caucasian man, who lives in Jacksonville, Florida, with his mother and two siblings, Linda, age 16 years and Mark, age 14 years. Richard was employed as a maintenance worker at a five-star hotel. On a night in August, a large hurricane made landfall on the Florida coast leaving Jacksonville with significant damages. On the night the storm made landfall, Richard worked a double shift at the hotel because workers did not show up, and he needed the money.



The next day, Richard returned home and found his trailer park unrecognizable because the neighborhood sustained significant damage. Richard was unsuccessful in texting his family because there was no cell phone service or any other means of communication. So, on the first night after the storm, emotionally distraught, he slept in his car. Two days later, Richard finally found his family at a local shelter.

Since 1998, Richard's mother, Rose, has been a certified nursing assistant at a local nursing home. Ten months after the storm, Rose is now working 16-hour days at the nursing home, while the family continues to live in an emergency shelter. Because of damages from the storm, the hotel closed and Richard was released without any notice. He has tried to get a construction job to help with the rebuilding effort, but there are limited numbers of construction crews, and Richard lacks any verifiable construction experience. Although he has worked since the age of 16, all of his employment experience is in the retail and fast food industries.

Initially, Richard wanted to talk to a counselor about the losses he sustained from the storm. The counselor first inquired about immediate needs of safety and security, and Richard suggested that he felt secure for the moment but was very discouraged because he had been unable to find a steady job. Richard noted that he received mental health counseling immediately after the hurricane and that he no longer had difficulty sleeping or felt agitated. He stated that he was frustrated at being unable to provide for his family and disliked relying solely on his mother for financial assistance. The counselor suggested that the two of them work collaboratively to explore his beliefs and values regarding work and life through a concept called *narrative counseling*.

As part of the first stage in narrative counseling, the counselor and Richard completed a lifeline. Richard was provided with a sheet of paper on which he drew a line down the center of the page. He placed his date of birth on the left top corner and the current date on the top right corner. Richard was encouraged to mark down important life events, such as schooling, jobs, and starting a family. The counselor inquired about the high points, low points, and important people in his life during each stage. Richard was asked to provide an adjective that described the chapter and to title that period of time. Richard's lifeline consisted of four main chapters.

Richard called the first chapter "Mixed Emotions." Richard described his early childhood as stable with a military father and stay-at-home mom. Every day after school, Richard rushed home to a hot meal with baked desserts and most evenings concluded with Richard and his dad playing catch. Richard expressed feelings of guilt because his siblings never had the opportunity to develop a relationship with their father because his dad later abandoned the family. Richard stated that many days after school, he found his mother crying, and he hated seeing his mother hurt and vowed never to cause her any distress. He indicated that during this time, the family lifestyle underwent a

negative change, forcing his mother to return to work; he became the caregiver for his siblings. Richard stated that he was very angry during this period in his life, and that he failed his sophomore year of high school. To explicitly explore Richard's beliefs when titling chapters, the counselor rephrased and pointed out Richard's disclosed emotions.

The next chapter of Richard's life addressed ages 16 to 19 years, which he identified with the title "Cheated." Richard expressed resentment because his family restrictions caused him to have limited vocational opportunities with no skills because he had to work to help the family financially and, therefore, he accepted any available job opportunity. He expressed anger as he recalled memories such as going to bed hungry, having no air conditioning in the house, and earning poor grades.

The next chapter of Richard's life was titled "Worker Bee." Richard stated that this time period marked his independence because he began his first real job with the hotel. He was making a living working a 40+ hour workweek and making significant contributions to the household. Richard was definitely the man of the house, and he was satisfied with that role until the hurricane changed his life. The current chapter for Richard was titled "Awakening." Richard stated that the storm had forced him to see his lack of preparation for life; he discussed his feelings about his inability to protect his family from the storm, his inability to locate his family after the storm, and his inability to provide for his family since the storm. Richard talked about his little brother who idolizes him and indicated that he does not want to disappoint him as their father did. Richard stated that his current situation was similar to his father's role and he despised the similarities. Richard felt the family may be better off without him. Right now, he felt that he was just another mouth to feed and that he was as dependent on his mother as his siblings were.

After Richard finished his narrative, the counselor asked him to consider the similarities in his stories. This began the second stage of narrative counseling, deconstruction. Identified themes included sacrificing his life for the good of the family and feelings of regret. He stated that he was a victim of circumstance who had to help his family and that he would not abandon them. Richard noted that he had never made the connections between the patterns in his life and the impact of his father's absence on both him and his family. Another pattern Richard noticed was his career uncertainty; as a result of the uncertainty, he was a 24-year-old with no clear vocational foundation. His overall life meaning was one of no choices—always sacrifice.

The counselor challenged Richard to consider other ways of viewing the important events in his life. He became a bit confused, so the counselor asked how he might change the focus from others to him and his own needs. Richard indicated he had never felt empowered to consider his needs and that he always "did what was right for the family because family comes first." When challenged further, Richard admitted that he could consider both his own and his family's needs together rather than ignoring his desires.

As the deconstruction phase continued, Richard was asked to define his own values and beliefs. The counselor inquired about his motivation in work, family, and leisure. Richard stated that he was willing to do anything to provide for his family. He mentioned being regretful about not going to college but believed that this was an impossible dream because of his family commitments and his age. By reflecting content and meaning and challenging Richard, the counselor helped him recognize that he could attend to both family and personal needs simultaneously. For example, they discussed the possibility that he could attend a community college part time. Also, they processed how he could share his feelings with his mother and siblings so that everyone could feel included in the decision-making process.

In the construction phase, Richard was provided with another blank sheet of paper in which he repeated the initial lifeline exercise. However, this time he placed the current date in the left-hand corner; in the right-hand corner, he placed a future date that was 3 years from the current date. Richard began to talk about going to school and his desire to become a certified air conditioning and heating repairman. He titled this new chapter “New Starts.” After much discussion and preparation, Richard brought his mother to a counseling session and shared his new way of being by explaining he wanted to meet the needs of his family but also attend to his own hopes and dreams.

## IMPLICATIONS

Counselors who work with individuals who are displaced workers as a result of a natural disaster should be aware of the special needs that exist in this population. Typically, some of these displaced workers have been unemployed or underemployed prior to the disaster (U.S. Department of Labor, 2006, 2007). Following the disaster, some individuals may be laid off and may be without work for a significant period of time; because of these long periods of unemployment, these individuals may have lower self-esteem (Attewell, 1999). These displaced workers may relocate in an attempt to find work, but the work they secure is often at a lower wage (Clayton & Spletzer, 2006). The lower wage can affect the displaced worker’s ability to secure basic needs and subsequently affects their self-esteem. Last, as described in the case study, these displaced workers and counselors should anticipate a significant drop in the employment rates of areas affected by a natural disaster (U.S. Department of Labor, 2006, 2007).

Richard’s story demonstrates many of the issues facing disaster survivors. He felt a great sense of loss, needed both immediate and long-term assistance, and was affected vocationally by the storm. Through narrative career counseling, Richard identified themes in his life story and realized that he believed he could not meet the needs of both himself and his family. Through the deconstruction process, Richard recognized that there were alternative ways to make personal meaning of his life events and began to feel empowered by this new

way of being. The counselor provided a safe and therapeutic atmosphere for Richard while challenging him to rethink his perspective on his life. Success came when Richard created a new lifeline that included his own dreams as well as his financial responsibility to his family.

Narrative career counseling can be an effective tool in addressing the vocational needs of disaster survivors. Through reflective listening and focusing on allowing clients to identify how they make meaning of their lives (Peavy, 1996), counselors can help survivors find new ways of viewing their circumstances and empower them to take charge of their lives. Additionally, disaster survivors can begin moving beyond simply addressing their basic needs and move toward truly reconstructing a life based on their newly discovered meanings.

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