From colonialism to ultranationalism: History and development of career counseling in Malaysia.

This article documents the development of career counseling in Malaysia from 1957--when the British colonizers departed--to 2000. Although counseling, psychology, and psychiatry had their roots in mental health and medical environments, career counseling had its origins in the system of schooling and has now spread widely to business and industry. This article presents information on the historic and economic context of the development of career counseling, an exploration of the educational system from which career counseling was born, the cultural elements that have formed career counseling in the Malaysian context, and the application of M. Pope's (1995, 2000) stage development model to the development of career counseling in the Malaysian context.

Historic and Economic Context

To understand what a nation is now and may be in the future, it is important to have knowledge of its past and how it developed. Malaysia is geographically positioned at the crossroads of economic trading between the East and the West. Occupying a peninsula jutting down from Thailand, it was perfectly positioned for sailing ships in the 1500s to 1800s to follow its coastline as they searched for an entry point for trade with Asia. To reach China, traders had to pass through the Straits of Malacca, a narrow band of ocean with Malaysia on the east and the Indonesian island of Sumatra on the west.

Economic Crossroads

As trade between Asia and Europe became increasingly important to both continents (e.g., tea, tin, pepper, other spices, silks), European nations competed for control of these straits because control of the shipping lanes in the Straits of Malacca was critical to such trade (Wallace, 1869; Winstedt, 1981). The middle section of the Straits of Malacca (headquartered at Malacca itself) was controlled by first the Indians (400 B.C.E.-539 A.D.), then the native Malays (1445-1511), next the Portuguese (1511-1647), and then the Dutch (1647-1824); all the while, the
Chinese kept political and economic relationships with each new ruler (Winstedt, 1981). None of these nations desired to colonize the whole of the area but only to control this important shipping port. The British gained a toehold in Malaysia in 1786 when they developed a settlement on Penang Island (at the northern beginning of the Straits of Malacca) and then in 1819 when they developed a settlement at Singapore (on the most southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, at the southern end of the Straits of Malacca).

Malaysia was a series of independent states before the British took control, each ruled by a king or sultan. According to Tregonning (1966), nearly all of the native Malay community, however, accepted the British rule, as "the British worked with them, respecting their faith, their social structure, and their rulers" (p. 18). This was the strength of the British and led to their successful rule. The British mined the tin, gathered the rubber and tea, developed a transportation infrastructure (highways and railways) to get the goods to seaports for shipping to Great Britain, and developed governmental and educational systems that were based on their own models.

World War II, however, was the beginning of the end of the British colonization of Malaysia (Tregonning, 1966; Winstedt, 1981). Facing a rising nationalism, the British gave Malaysia its independence in 1957. As they left, they installed the Malays in government and the Chinese in business, paying tribute to a tension that had been a part of Malaysian society for hundreds of years (Mohamed, 1970). The British left a legacy upon which all modern Malaysia is built—a legacy of "communalism" (divisions into Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities), of educational institutions bearing their imprint, of remarkable roads and transportation, and of a constitutional monarchy in which a king is elected every 4 years from among the nine sultans who rule the Malaysian states.

Cultural Diversity

Malaysia is a country of great cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity.

The whole population of Malaysia numbers no more than that of Australia, but culturally, it is most diverse. This is one of the country's major attractions. Even the most superficial observer cannot but be charmed by the constant contrast between the various peoples; to the most observant it is a constant challenge to understand and appreciate these cultural backgrounds. (Tregonning, 1966, p. 10)

Malaysia is composed of 50% native Malays, 35% ethnic Chinese, 10% ethnic Indians (especially Tamils from southern India), and 5% indigenous peoples (referred to, along with the Malays, as bumiputra—people generally aboriginal in their origins). Almost all Malays are Moslem, most Chinese are either Buddhist or Christian, most Indians are either Hindu or Christian, and most indigenous peoples in Malaysia are animists. Currently, Malaysia is experiencing population growth in the native Malay sector through high native Malay birthrates and through encouraging immigration from nearby Indonesia (95% native Malay; Mahathir, 1997).

Importance of Language

The primary language of Malaysia has changed over the years. Under the British, the language of instruction at all levels of schooling was English. Now, the primary language of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia, a standard form of the Malay language. In the elementary and secondary schools, instruction is conducted exclusively in Bahasa Malaysia, although in most higher education institutions, it is now conducted in a combination of Bahasa Malaysia and English. The reasons for this transition are found in the political history of the country.

Beginning in the 1960s with the growth of a fundamentalist Islamic political party (PAS) and a rise in ultranationalism, which declared all "Western" (read "non-Malaysian" or "modern") ideas as evil and foreign, there was a turn away from English as the language of instruction. There was a felt need politically to enhance the sense of "we are all Malaysians" instead of the communalistic concept of separate communities of Malays, Chinese, or Indians.

The Chinese especially maintained their ethnic identity through their language, and many did not even speak their national language. The Malays resented this and with the communal riots of 1969 in Malaysia came a sense that Malaysia had to unify its people—that Malaysians needed a common identity. The political leadership of the country, led by the Malays, instituted a policy to require that the primary language of instruction in all schools would be Bahasa Malaysia. This was seen as an important factor in developing a Malaysian national identity.

Although this policy has accomplished much of its desired purpose, it has also had an unforeseen by-product of isolating Malaysia internationally. With English as the international language of commerce and Malaysia building a more industrial-based economy, which was more dependent on international trade, the lowering of English language skills in the Malaysian population occurred at a bad time economically. It is a problem the political leaders have been willing to accept in exchange for peace between the various cultural constituencies of Malaysia.

Educational System

The origin of and growth in career counseling in Malaysia has been in the schools (Lloyd, 1987). Beginning in the elementary and secondary schools, Malaysian schooling has always had a distinctive English focus; however, higher education has now taken on a more egalitarian U.S. flavor.

Schools

Elementary and secondary schooling in Malaysia is based on a distinctly English model. The first 6 years are spent in elementary school (Standards 1 through 6). Then, after an examination, students continue in secondary school for a maximum of 6 more years (Forms 1 through 6). Most students only complete Form 5. Form 6 is considered a college preparatory year.
Students compete for positions at the finest schools and universities as well as for federal and corporate scholarships through a nationwide examination process that is required for all students, based on the English system of education. Students who excel on their examinations have many doors opened to them. They get to attend the best secondary schools after completing Standard 6, and they are eligible for full scholarships to attend selected overseas universities in the United States or Great Britain after completing Form 5 or Form 6. Students who do not do as well are left to find a local private college or university and pay for it themselves. Many in the burgeoning Malaysian middle class have seen this British-like system as a way of keeping their children from experiencing the economic mobility that comes with education in Malaysian society. It is also a tremendous waste of excellent human resources in a country that cannot afford to waste such a valuable resource as its population.

Higher Education

Malaysian society puts a high premium on education and looks upon education as an important means of social mobility and economic advancement across lines of class and ethnicity (Lim, 1993). Higher education is perceived as one of the strategies of nation building, and providing increasing access to such education for Malaysian citizens is seen as critical to progress. Furthermore, the Malaysian government has issued a strategic plan called “Vision 2020,” which sets as its goal to leave the category of a “developing” nation to become a "developed" nation by the year 2020. Because of all of these concerns, higher education has been given the highest priority.

Lloyd (1987) reported that in 1985, 21,720 Malaysian students were attending U.S. universities. Malaysia was, therefore, the country sending the second highest number of college students to the United States. Gan and Ismail (1998) reported that in 1995, more than 50,600 Malaysian students were studying abroad and about 40% of them were being paid for by the government. As a by-product of the communalism, these scholarship programs were developed only for the bumiputra population, that is, the Malays and the aboriginal peoples of Malaysia. All other groups (Chinese, Indians) had to fend for themselves under this policy.

Today, Malaysia has developed a system of 11 state-supported public universities along with 5 private universities and over 500 private colleges that run "twinning programmes" with universities from other countries, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Great Britain, where the private colleges offer degrees through the overseas universities. Public universities include the University of Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia (Science University of Malaysia), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (Technology University of Malaysia), Universiti Putra Malaysia (World University of Malaysia, formerly Universiti Pertanian Malaysia [Agricultural University of Malaysia]), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia), Universiti Teknologi MARA, International Islamic University, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS—University of Malaysia at Sarawak, located in state of Sarawak on the northern part of island of Borneo), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS—University of Malaysia at Sabah, located in the state of Sabah on the northern part of island of Borneo), and Universiti Utara Malaysia (Northern University of Malaysia). In response to the economic and social changes in and around Malaysia, higher education in Malaysia in the latter part of the 1990s has undergone fundamental reforms in terms of both its policy and orientation to develop a technologically savvy, sophisticated workforce to sustain long-term economic growth and to cope effectively with global competition (Gan & Ismail, 1998).

Furthermore, Malaysia is developing a strong system of private colleges, such as Sunway College in Kuala Lumpur. Through such national legislation as the New Education Act (1996), the National Council on Higher Education Act (1996), the Private Higher Education Institution Act (1996), The Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Act (1996), the National Accreditation Board Act (1996), and the National Higher Education Fund Board Act (1997), there has been a dramatic expansion domestically of access to higher education for Malaysians (Gan & Ismail, 1998). These pieces of legislation were designed to position Malaysia as a regional center of educational excellence and attract other students, especially from Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN, which includes Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei) countries to its institutions of higher education. The establishment of these various private universities and colleges by the private sector augurs well for the development of Malaysia into such a regional education center. These private universities and colleges have developed out of a distinct policy that rejects the elitist nature of British education and embraces the far more egalitarian and democratic nature of U.S. education (Gan & Ismail, 1998).

One of the hoped for outcomes of the legislation allowing private colleges and universities is to expand access to qualify higher education locally to reduce the huge amounts that students who study abroad pay in foreign currencies. Because of the large number of Malaysian students who study abroad, there has been a substantial outflow of currency in foreign exchange, which constitutes a significant deficit in the nation’s balance of payment. One goal of the Malaysian government is to teach 17% of Malaysian students in domestic colleges and universities. At present, about 3 billion Malaysian ringgit (Malaysian currency unit) are being spent annually on educating Malaysians overseas. The government, therefore, also views the expansion of higher education locally as a means of reducing foreign exchange outflow.

Cultural Elements That Affected Career Counseling

Scorzelli (1987) stated that it is "unlikely that family therapy in the Western sense will ever be an important part" (p. 240) of the counseling profession in Malaysia. He goes on to say why, stressing the issue of "loss of face" for the head of the family. Scorzelli is right, but only in a limited sense. Family therapy "in the Western sense" will never take hold in Malaysia; like any other technique or strategy, model or theory, it can never be wholly imported from another culture with expectations of similar results. Culturally appropriate modifications will always need to be made. The analogy is like planting a new variety of rice that has been developed in the United States and watching it grow under the environmental influences of the Malaysian culture. It may or may not take root; it may need less water, more phosphorus; it may bear unusual fruit; but over time it will adapt to Malaysian conditions or die if adaptation fails. Family therapy or career counseling (Pope, 1999), or cognitive therapy (Varma & Zain, 1996), or management science (Pearson & Entrenin, 1998) can only exist where it is modified in culturally appropriate ways.
Career counseling, like counseling in general in Malaysia, has a distinctly U.S. flavor but has been redeveloped in the Malaysian context to incorporate aspects of Malaysian culture. Pope (1999), who lived and worked in Malaysia, detailed the differences between individually oriented and group-oriented (collectivist) cultures—similar to the United States and Malaysia respectively—and identified some of the aspects of career counseling that are more effective in collectivist cultures like Malaysia, where collective identity, emotional dependence, and obligations to and the welfare of the family prevail. Because there is a strong extended family orientation toward decision making in Malaysia, Pope (1999) recommended that the extended family be involved in the career counseling process, not solely the individual. Leong (1991), who was born in Malaysia, reported that Asian American students had a more dependent decision-making style than White students, based on scores on the Assessment of Career Decision-Making Style subscale (ACDM; Harren, 1978).

Varna and Zain (1996) and Pedersen (1983) reported that religion is an important sociocultural value in Malaysia. Each of the four major ethnic subdivisions of Malaysian society has its own distinct majority religion or philosophical orientation: Malays and Islam, Chinese and Buddhism, Indians and Hinduism, and aboriginal peoples and animism. The emphases vary by group and individual, but the religious/philosophical values are always a part of the life of the person. For the Malays, Islam is very important and guides all of their decisions throughout their lives. In career counseling, it is important to address these religious/philosophical values as a part of the career decision-making process. For example, if a student has been selected to do his or her studies overseas, the local imam (Islamic religious leader) will visit the home and talk with the parents and student about attending the mosque in their new locale; if there is no mosque there, the student may well choose not to attend that college.

Malaysian families have traditionally placed importance and status on professional occupations; therefore, these positions are more valued than others. As countries move from an agrarian economy to an industrial one, a broader spectrum of professional occupations are created (Watts, 1996). As reported by Singaravelu (1998), the list of acceptable occupations is expanding as more and more Asians are now selecting nontraditional professional fields in liberal arts and communications.

The use of career assessment during career counseling is growing in Malaysia. Scorzelii (1987) found that Malaysian counselor education programs lacked a course in assessment and cited the reason that "all psychological tests available in Malaysian are Western in origin and lack local norms" (p. 240). In 1999, this had been remedied as a direct result of translating and reforming well-used career assessments such as the Self-Directed Search and Vocational Preference Inventory (M. Musa, personal communication, June 23, 1999).

Women in Malaysian society are distinctly second-class citizens according to Hutchings (1998), Mahathir (1997), and Nazir (1985). Hutchings (1998) conducted interviews with 14 Australian and 16 Malaysian managers. The analysis was based on comparisons of practices used by nine multinational corporations (MNC) in Australia and Malaysia, with special account being taken of cultural and social restrictions on women's employment opportunities in Malaysia. It is argued that the cultural and social inequality involving gender in Malaysia was upheld and reinforced by MNG in the workplace.

Career Counseling in Malaysia

According to Lloyd (1987), the counseling and guidance movement reached Malaysia, as it did most of the world (Pope, 2000), through the work and leadership of the counseling profession in the United States. In 1963, the Malaysian Ministry of Education had so accepted the fact of school counseling in its schools that it prepared a policy statement "which stipulated that all schools, especially secondary schools, should have their own guidance teachers" (Amir & Latiff, 1984, p. 3).

In the Schools

School counseling in Malaysia is different than it is in the United States, but it had similar beginnings (Iyer, 1975; Symons, 1977). Pedersen (1983) reported that school counselors in Malaysia were typically teachers who had returned to the university for additional course work beyond the baccalaureate, although there is now a baccalaureate degree in counseling that is offered by at least one university (Universiti Putra Malaysia, formerly Universiti Pertanian Malaysia). These school counselors are typically assigned both teaching and counseling duties in their schools (Lloyd, 1987). These are similar beginnings to those in the United States that are reported by Brewer (1942) and Pope (2000).

School counselors in Malaysia often function as vocational guidance or career counselors and assist students in career exploration and choice. This role was primarily one fulfilled by the extended family prior to urbanization, but the school counselor has now taken on this role for most students and their families. Marimuthu (1983) and Lela (1983) discussed how the educational system in Peninsular Malaysia has been structured and restructured to meet some of the changing needs of a modernizing economy and a multicultural society. The achievement of these changes by careful, deliberate manpower and educational planning, with the public education system playing a vital role, is discussed. The increased availability of school counselors to assist in career planning and the increased focus of the schools on careers also are cited as factors in meeting these societal needs.

Although the British contributed much to the economic and educational systems of Malaysia, they did not have a system of vocational guidance when they established the Malaysian educational system. Furthermore, as the British revised their own educational system to include careers officers and careers education and even careers guidance in the 1940s, these innovations were instituted after the United States had developed such systems in the latter 1890s (Brewer, 1942; Lloyd, 1987; Pope, 2000). The British also failed to import these revisions to Malaysia. It was left to U.S.-educated career counselors to bring such ideas back to Malaysia.

In Business and Industry

In the early 1990s, counselor educators in Malaysia were getting their doctorates in the United States and returning home to reshape their
domestic counseling programs. Awareness of the increasing role of career counseling in business, industry, and government in the United States led to an expansion of the professional roles and definition of school counselors in counselor education programs in Malaysia, according to M. Musa (personal correspondence, November 12, 1999). When career counselors from the United States asked their Malaysian counselor educator counterparts about their more entrepreneurial counseling students, these types of students were already beginning to be employed in human resource and training departments in large corporations to design and develop internal career services. Telekom Malaysia, the domestic national telephone company of Malaysia, and HICOM Holdings Berhad, Malaysia, the parent company of the domestic national car company of Malaysia, both hired career counselors as part of their human resource and training departments (Musa, 1991).

Stages in Development of Career Counseling

Malaysia and the United States have many similarities in how career counseling has emerged (Pope, 2000; Scorzielli, 1987). Pope (1995, 2000) developed a social transitions stage model to describe the development of career counseling in the United States, and Zhang and Pope (1997) have applied this model to the development of career counseling in China and Hong Kong.

Stage 1—Beginning of Vocational Guidance (1957-1969)

Malaysia had a long period under the British to develop its agricultural and mining sectors; however, since the British left and returned Malaysia to its own people in 1957, it has been in continuous economic transition, mirroring similar changes internationally. Malaysia has been a rapidly industrializing economy, along with Singapore and Thailand, and led the world with a consistent economic growth of 7% annually from the mid-1980s until the later 1990s. The beginning of vocational guidance in Malaysia took place against the backdrop of the development of a postcolonial political economy.

Career counseling emerged in Malaysia during this time of transition from an agricultural/mining-based stage to an industrial-based stage, and the emergence of career counseling in the United States also took place during a transition between the similar stages. More than 100 years ago, Kuala Lumpur was established as the capital of Malaysia. Founded by miners who discovered tin where the Sungei Kelang and Sungei Gombak (two rivers) met, Kuala Lumpur (which means "muddy river junction") has become the focal point for all of the major successes and problems of Malaysian society. Malaysia’s economy until recently had been largely commodities-based and heavily dependent on exports of natural rubber, palm oil, and tin. Beginning with the colonial period of the British occupation of Malaya in 1824, as memorialized in the Treaty of London (Winstedt, 1981), this agricultural/mining-based stage consisted of a national economy dependent on agricultural and mining enterprises, on natural and, therefore, finite resources that were directly removed from the land. Stage 1 in the development of career counseling in Malaysia began with the British leaving in 1957 and ended with a major riot between the Malays and the Chinese in 1969 over who should have control of the country (Mohamed, 1993), but the defining characteristic was the agricultural/mining to industrial transition based on the political handover of the British. The Malaysians could now begin to control their own educational, economic, and political systems.

During this stage, the British system of careers officers (guidance teachers) and careers education, in the elementary and secondary schools, reached its peak in influence as the Malaysians at first attempted to hold on to the British influence on education and then began to slowly change it. Just after the British had left Malaysia, Malaysian educators tried to hold onto the British system of educational testing and careers guidance. It was what they knew best. It was the system in which most of them had been educated. Although there was a strong pull in Malaysia at that time to reject everything British, there was also a countervailing push to keep what was working and what was familiar. In education, nothing had been developed yet to replace the British system.


After the political issues involved in gaining independence from Great Britain were completed (Mohamad, 1970), the Malaysians turned their attention from economic development and establishing a national identity to developing an industrial base in their country. The Malaysian governmental leadership determined that they needed to unify their country around two programs: Everyone in Malaysia should speak a common language, and everyone should have a car (Mahathir, 1997; Mohamad, 1970). Similar to the "chicken in every pot" political phrase during the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, this "car for every household" idea caught on, and HICOM Holdings Berhad, Malaysia, and its subsidiary, Proton Malaysia, were founded to provide an inexpensive solution to the problem. This solution was a national car called a "Proton"—the first body style was the "Saga," soon to be followed by the slightly more upscale "Wira."

During this stage, a new vocational guidance system was being developed for the elementary and secondary schools, even as the orientation of schooling in Malaysia was being refocused from a British to a U.S. orientation. This was most visible in higher education where an increasing number of Malaysian higher education faculty chose to study for their doctoral degrees in the United States. At the elementary and secondary levels, guidance teachers were becoming school counselors in the best schools of the country, as the need for career counseling was elevated in social priority.

Stage 3—Emergence of Career Counseling in Business, Industry, and Private Practice (1994-Present)

In the middle of all this, the rest of the world was hit by technology advances, including microcomputers and the Internet. Malaysia was making progress in the first transition but was now thrust, somewhat unwillingly and unprepared, into a second stage (1994-present). This transition led to the infusion of career counseling into business and industry. Trying to borrow the best from the rest of the world, Malaysian business and industry spent heavily on consultants to obtain computer literacy for their workforce and to develop employee assistance programs and career development programs for their workers to intercept some of the problems that they had seen in other countries. Malaysia was at the end of its boom economy, and by 1998 the country had fallen into another major recession similar to that of the early 1980s.
The students who had been sent overseas for higher education were returning. The colleges and universities within Malaysia were continuing to grow and turn out even more graduates. These graduates had high expectations about what would be waiting for them when they completed their degree, but the economy stumbled badly in 1998, just as these new college graduates were ready to be highly productive and successful.

Another Malaysian dilemma was looming; this one was of unfulfilled expectations. This social transition presages another period of major growth for career counseling as these graduates are unable to meet their expectations. Career counseling was poised to help these college graduates fulfill their career dreams. Those who could not find work in the areas for which they had been prepared began to turn to private practice and university-based career counselors to help them decide what to do next.

Conclusion

Little did the political leaders of Malaysia realize that while they were trying to establish themselves as an industrial society, they would also be confronted with major changes in technology and, therefore, the beginning of the transition from an industrial-based to technology-based society.

With its aging political leadership continuing to focus on industrial development and conducting purges of younger leaders who have embraced modernity and technology, Malaysian society has been transitioning for more than 30 years, with little respite. These changes have led to a continuing and strengthening internal migration pattern from rural to urban centers with all of the concomitant problems inherent in such migration—loss of identity, change in values, and disconnection from traditions, family, and village (kampung; Gan & Ismail, 1998). Such social transitions mirror what has happened in other countries and are the fodder for the growth of career counseling in a society (Pope, 1999).

The political leadership of Malaysia developed their own plan to bridge these stages and their concomitant social upheaval. By expanding the role of information technology (IT) in the Malaysian economy and taking the lead in Asia in creating, producing, and using such technology, Malaysia must now move boldly into IT if it is to achieve the vision of becoming an "industrialized" nation and an IT world player by the year 2020 (Stockbridge, 1999). The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is a timely and significant effort to move Malaysia into the new information and technology stage. The Malaysian Government is developing this MSC, which will be an actual geographical region 15 km by 40 km, taking in part of Kuala Lumpur. The region will have a computer intranetwork operating at 2.5–10 gigabits per second. The MSC will be a virtual cyber city, and the Malaysian Government is inviting companies from all over the world to establish research and development facilities there.

Bold projects of this sort require an educated populace. Along with an educated populace with decreasing economic resources comes increasing dissatisfaction. Along with an educated populace comes a need to be creative, to challenge the old ways, to develop new solutions for new problems, to "think outside of the box." Malaysia has many of the pieces to solve this economic puzzle but also conjointly has an entrenched political establishment, which has promulgated an Internal Security Act that puts dissidents in prison for daring to challenge their authority (Mahathir, 1997). This heavy-handed approach to dissent has a stifling effect on diverse and creative thinking at the exact time that these attributes are increasingly important factors to success, not just for individuals but for the whole country.

These social transitions have led to a rise in the use of informal and formal career counseling (Mohamed & Musa, 1994). More workers are reporting a greater number of problems in the workplace along with increasing dissatisfaction. Corporations in Malaysia are developing a response to this that includes employee assistance counseling and career counseling.

Malaysia has always been at the crossroads of economic development, from the precolonial period to the present. Career counseling in Malaysia is currently poised for a great surge in popularity and customers, both from the schools and from the business, industry, and government sectors. With the economic positioning of Malaysia in readiness for the information and technology stage of development, there will be many opportunities for career counseling in this country.

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