

## My Career Chapter: Guidance Counsellors' Appraisal of its Suitability for Adolescents

Peter McIlveen & Wendy Patton, Queensland University of Technology  
&  
P. Nancey Hoare, University of Southern Queensland

### **Authors:**

Peter McIlveen (Corresponding Author)  
Manager of Careers & Employment  
Student Services  
University of Southern Queensland  
Toowoomba 4350  
AUSTRALIA  
+61 7 46312372  
+61 7 46312880 (fax)  
[mcilveen@usq.edu.au](mailto:mcilveen@usq.edu.au)

Wendy Patton  
Executive Dean  
Faculty of Education  
Queensland University of Technology  
Kelvin Grove Campus 4059  
AUSTRALIA  
+61 7 3138 3562

Nancey Hoare  
Psychologist (Career Development)  
Student Services  
University of Southern Queensland  
Toowoomba 4350  
AUSTRALIA  
+61 7 46312372

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents an investigation into the properties of a new narrative technique for career assessment and counselling, My Career Chapter: A Dialogical Autobiography. This technique is used to facilitate clients' construction of a meaningful career-related autobiography. Previous research indicates the usefulness of My Career Chapter for adult clients and its alignment with recommendations for the development and application of qualitative assessment and counselling techniques. This study specifically commences research into the technique's applicability for adolescents. A focus group, comprised of guidance counselling professionals whose work primarily pertained to the needs of adolescents, found that there is potential to develop a version of My Career Chapter that is suitable for adolescents.

## **My Career Chapter: Guidance Counsellors' Appraisal of its Suitability for Adolescents**

The salience of personal meaning and the construction of a career identity in the contemporary world of work necessitates the development and application of guidance procedures that meaningfully facilitate adolescents' construction of who they are and want to be (Guichard, 2005; Meijers, 2003). Accordingly, the constructivist, narrative approach to career counselling has emerged as a viable alternative to traditional methods of vocational guidance because of its emphasis upon meaning and identity (Patton & McMahon, 2006b). Notwithstanding the proven value of the traditional approaches to career development (e.g., person-environment fit), exemplars of narrative career assessment and counselling procedures (McIlveen & Patton, 2007; McMahon & Patton, 2003) demonstrate their relevance to contemporary guidance practice and the complexities of the educational and industrial environments in which adolescents make career-related decisions and educational choices.

Examples of narrative procedures include: The Storied Approach (Brott, 2001), the Career Style Interview (Savickas, 1989, 2005), the Life/Work Design approach (Campbell & Ungar, 2004), Working with Storytellers (McMahon, 2006), and the Career Systems Interview (McIlveen, McGregor-Bayne, Alcock, & Hjertum, 2003). Whilst those examples typify spoken, verbally-oriented procedures, other procedures entail visual and graphical dimensions. Examples of visually-oriented procedures include: The Life-line, Life Roles Circles, Card Sorts, and Goal Map (Brott, 2004); Construct Laddering, drawing, Family Constellation, and guided fantasy (Cochran, 1997); Career-o-Gram (Thorngren & Feit, 2001); and the My System of Career Influences (MSCI) reflection activity (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2005).

### *My Career Chapter: A Dialogical Autobiography*

This paper provides an overview of a new career assessment and counselling procedure, My Career Chapter: A Dialogical Autobiography (McIlveen, 2006). In doing so, the paper presents the specific issue of its potential applicability for adolescents. My Career Chapter falls under the aegis of the constructivist, narrative approach to career development. It was conceptually grounded in the recommendations for the development of qualitative career assessment and counselling procedures (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003). The recommendations put forward by McMahon and colleagues include:

- (a) Ground the assessment process in theory;
- (b) Test the career assessment process;
- (c) Ensure that the process can be completed in a reasonable time frame;
- (d) Design a process that fosters holism;
- (e) Write instructions for the client;
- (f) Write readable and easily understood instructions;
- (g) Sequence logical, simple, small achievable steps;
- (h) Provide a focused and flexible process;
- (i) Encourage co-operative involvement of counsellor and client; and
- (j) Include a debriefing process (p. 197-200).

Following these recommendations, My Career Chapter was designed to draw heavily upon theory. It is underpinned by the Systems Theory Framework (STF) (Patton & McMahon, 2006a), the Theory of Career Construction (Savickas, 2005), and the Theory of Dialogical Self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

My Career Chapter enables a client to produce a career-related autobiography for use in counselling and the work of self-exploration. Like the MSCI, My Career Chapter is explicitly based upon the Systems Theory Framework and is presented in a printed work

booklet; however they differ in that the former method is predominantly visual and graphical in procedure, whereas My Career Chapter is predominantly verbal and written in procedure. Like MSCI, My Career Chapter is structured and step-wise in procedure; thus making it different to other unstructured methods of autobiography, which offer little more than a paragraph of guiding instructions (e.g., Cochran, 1997).

In a typical administration of My Career Chapter, a client takes the booklet as a homework exercise following an initial assessment and establishment of a career counselling relationship. The client works through a series of steps beginning with general career-related questions which act as an orienting “warm-up exercise” for self-exploration. The client then contemplates “the big picture” of his or her career by viewing and reflecting upon a diagram depicting the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006a). Having thought about the various career influences depicted in the diagram, the client then rates how each influence is compatible or incompatible with one another. Next, the client commences writing the manuscript of the autobiography. Using a sentence-completion procedure (cf. Loevinger, 1985), the client writes about each career influence, from a past, present, and future perspective. The client then completes a sentence in which he or she rates the impact of the influence, and then writes a sentence which pertains to the influence’s emotional importance.

By way of example of the sentence-completion process, a client would be presented with the following items for the career influence of education.

School was.....

Studying or training for a career is.....

Future studies or training for me will.....

I mostly feel very positive / positive / indifferent / negative / very negative in relation to my education because.....

Study has a very positive / positive / neutral / negative / very negative impact upon my careerlife because.....

As can be seen, the sentence-stems are sufficiently open-ended to allow the user to project his or her thoughts into writing.

The next phase of the administration facilitates a process of self-dialogue. Having completed the bulk of the manuscript, the client then reads it aloud to himself or herself, all the while imagining that he or she is talking to himself or herself as if 5 years younger. After hearing the story of the 5-year older self, the imagined younger self writes editorial comments to the older self. Upon receiving the editorial comments of the younger self, the older (current) self writes back to the young editor with a summary of the career story and future. This process was founded upon a similar procedure used to generate dialogical transactions with oneself, according to the Theory of Dialogical Self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

At the subsequent session of career counselling, a process of relational dialogue is facilitated by the counsellor reading aloud the client’s story. Discussion, interpretation, and co-construction of life themes (Savickas, 2005) then proceeds as part of the narrative counselling experience.

Previous research with adult clients in career counselling has revealed that the writing of the manuscript produces a mild positive emotional experience and no significant negative effects (McIlveen, Ford, & Dun, 2005). Other research has investigated counsellors’ experiences of My Career Chapter through an intensive training workshop and personal experience of the procedure (McIlveen, 2007). The latter studies elucidated the counsellors’ experience of My Career Chapter with respect to their work with an adult client population. It found broad support for My Career Chapter’s alignment with the standards for the construction (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003) and application (McMahon & Patton,

2002) of constructivist career assessment and counselling procedures. The counsellors who participated in that research also raised questions regarding My Career Chapter's suitability for adolescents and clients who were not "verbal" or "psychologically-minded".

### *The Current Study*

Despite the emergence of narrative assessment and counselling procedures, there has been limited research into their processes and outcomes (McIlveen & Patton, 2007). This study forms part of a broader programme of research that aims to critique My Career Chapter's theoretical and technical composition, and its practical applications. Hence, following on from the question pertaining to adolescents that was raised in previous research, the current study investigated the potential of My Career Chapter for an adolescent client population. The study engaged Guidance Counsellors who worked with adolescent clients, and sought their opinions with respect to My Career Chapter's alignment with the recommended standards for qualitative career assessment and counselling procedures. The study was reported according to the recommendations for qualitative research in counselling (Morrow, 2005).

## **Method**

### *Assumptions*

The current study was constructivist in ontology and epistemology (Ponterotto, 2005). It sought to understand the shared experiences and opinions of Guidance Counsellors and acknowledged the co-constructive influence of dialogue within the group training and follow-up interviews.

### *Research Design*

This study used a focus group (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007; Wilkinson, 2003) as the method of qualitative enquiry. Focus groups have been presented as a useful process for the construction of psychological assessment tools to improve their content validity (Vogt, King, & King, 2004). Furthermore, focus groups have been used for process research into other qualitative career assessment and counselling procedures to investigate alignment with the recommendations for qualitative assessment and counselling procedures (e.g., McMahan, Watson, & Patton, 2005).

### *Research-as-Instrument Statement*

The primary developer's appraisal of My Career Chapter (viz, the first author), has been accounted for through reflexive research (Etherington, 2004), performed as autoethnographic writing (McIlveen, in press), personal application of the procedure, professional application in career counselling, and critical reflection through an independent audit (Smith, 2003) of the aforementioned reflexive research. This study was conceived out of a commitment to understand the experience of other users of My Career Chapter and to concurrently seek a critical review of its qualities, so as to inform modifications or improvements to its composition.

### *Participants*

Given the specificity of the topic in question, the focus group method lent itself to a sampling frame that would be best represented by Guidance Counsellors whose expertise was in the area of adolescent issues. Thus, a homogenous group of seven participants was purposively recruited for this study. The recommended number of participants for focus group research varies, with some estimates at four to eight participants (Wilkinson, 2003) and others at six to twelve (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Thus the number of

participants in the current study fell within the recommended ranges. All participants, but one, directly provided career education classes and career counselling to students, as class pupils or individual career counselling clients. One participant was an academic involved in the training of Guidance Counsellors. The participants' knowledge and skills in relation to adolescent counselling was the specific criterion for selection. Their participation in the focus group was voluntary. They were invited to participate in the workshop which was part of a suite of professional development services offered by the Faculty of Education at the University Southern Queensland, Australia. Upon invitation, the participants were aware that the workshop on My Career Chapter would be followed by a focus group seeking their views on its applicability to adolescents.

The group included a Group Leader and a Group Monitor who had been previously trained in the application of My Career Chapter. The Group Leader facilitated the discussion. The Group Monitor's role was to participate as a critical, but silent, observer of the group dynamics and to record notes that would be used to validate the recordings and themes drawn from the analysis.

### *Sources of Data*

The participants were provided training in the theory and recommended applications of My Career Chapter. This training process sought to firstly ensure that potential users would have a reasonable grounding in the use of My Career Chapter and to secondarily glean their experiences and appraisals of it with regard to the standards for the qualitative career assessment processes (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003). In summary, the training program comprised:

- (a) An orientation and introduction to the recommendations for qualitative career assessment and counselling procedures (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003);
- (b) A self-reflection exercise: What is Your Career Counselling Worldview? (Watson, 2006), which facilitated participants' consideration of the theoretical, practical and cultural dimensions of their approach to counselling;
- (c) An overview of the foundational theories of My Career Chapter: Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 1999), Theory of Career Construction (Savickas, 2005), and Theory of Dialogical Self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993);
- (d) A description of the theory of narrative career counselling and an overview of an exemplary technique, namely, My System of Career Influences;
- (e) An account of My Career Chapter's development and its relationship to theory and other techniques;
- (f) As there were limitations on the time to operate the training and focus group, rather than completing the entire My Career Chapter, as was the case in the previous research (McIlveen, 2007), only a selection of its components was completed by the participants. These included the warm-up exercise, thinking about the big picture, internal/external compatibility process, writing of one page of the manuscript, and sampling the reading back and interpretation process.

The training took place over the period of 2 hours and included rest breaks and discussions.

*Focus group discussion.* Immediately following the training session, all participants joined the critical focus group discussion. Discussion was stimulated by the Alignment with Recommendations Questionnaire (see below). At the commencement of the focus group discussion, participants were instructed to focus on My Career Chapter in relation to their own practices with high school adolescents.

The group leader went to some length to explain that the purpose of the group was to determine the participants' perspectives on My Career Chapter; an excerpt from the transcript attests to this intention:

What I would like you to do is critically think about this process, from the point-of-view of working in a school setting. . . . . Don't think about the general adult market. It's about how you would practise too. I'm asking you from the point-of-view of me not being a school practitioner. . . . . I don't understand your perspective, and that's what I'm interested in hearing.

The stimulus questions were read out by the focus group leader (i.e., the chief investigator) and a discussion ensued. The focus group discussion ran for 1 hour and was digitally recorded for later transcription (by a professional agency) and analyses. This recording was supplemented by the Group Monitor's notes.

*Alignment with Recommendations Questionnaire.* As used in previous research (McIlveen, 2007), a set of stimulus questions pertaining to each recommendation for the design and delivery of qualitative career counselling and assessment procedures (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003) was used in this study in a semi-structured delivery. For example, the criterion relating to grounding an assessment process in theory was explored with the stimulus question: "How does My Career Chapter relate to theory and which aspects of its application of theory stood out for you?" The discussion was allowed to move according to its own dynamics rather than being constrained to the questions.

*Group Monitor's notes.* The notes recorded by the Group Monitor were integrated into the analysis as a secondary check for veracity of the interpretation of the transcript.

*Written comments.* Participants were provided a sheet of paper with the questions and sufficient space in which to write comments. These were collected at the end of the focus group for inclusion in the data analysis for a secondary check on interpretation of the transcript.

### *Data Analysis*

The data generated from the focus group were analysed with respect to recommended procedures (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). As for generating meaning by hermeneutic analysis, the transcript was analysed using the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Prior to commencing the analysis, the audio recording of the focus group session was listened to prior to concurrently reading through the transcript again. This re-read-and-listen process was done to refresh, note transcript omissions or errors, and to actively re-engage with the dialogue of the group.

Notes were recorded in the left-hand margin of the transcript during the first reading. These notes indicated specific experiences revealed in the text. Upon completing this pass of the transcript, it was read again, taking into account the initial notes and entering themes that subsumed the notes. This thematic level of analysis was conceptually higher than that of the first and aimed to create psychological understandings of the text, which were both grounded in the comments, yet sufficiently abstract to allow for connection with conceptual themes. The themes were then listed at the bottom of the transcript and reviewed to determine conceptual clusters, which were subsequently checked against the raw transcript for meaningfulness. Text which was indicative of clusters' and themes' meanings was retained for exemplification.

*Trustworthiness.* A check was made to assure trustworthiness of the data and the analysis according to the paradigm-specific requirements for constructivist or postpositivist research (Morrow, 2005). Hence, the next phase of analysis involved comparing and contrasting the Group Monitor's notes with those of the original analysis. No discrepancies were evident and there was concordance across the documents. To further this process of reliability, the Group Monitor read through the notes and themes of the original analysis to check if they compared and contrasted with her reading of the transcript and her notes taken during the group session. The Group Monitor attested that there were no discrepancies, and concordance between the interpretation, transcript, her notes, and recollections, was evident.

## **Results**

The group indicated that My Career Chapter had potential for adolescent clients who were exploring their career options. They all agreed that it had significant value as a career assessment and counselling procedure, which was amenable to career education classes. In order to improve its applicability for a young client population, the group offered suggestions for administrative modifications. Four superordinate themes were derived from the transcript of the focus group.

### *Theory*

There was an unequivocal perception that My Career Chapter had inherent and obvious links to the three major theories underpinning its development, especially the Systems Theory Framework. This point was not elaborated upon any further.

### *Administrative Process and Client Capacity*

The participants agreed that the complete process of My Career Chapter was not beyond the scope of their younger client group. Nevertheless, they did indicate that some students may have difficulty with the procedure, not because of age per se, but because of their limited ability to reflect upon the process to generate personalised learning from the experience. They were also concerned by its length and the seemingly complicated instructions. Their suggestions indicated that it was not the tasks per se (i.e., the steps), but the combination of complex instructions and sheer number of tasks. However, in order to overcome this perceived threat, the participants spontaneously proffered pedagogically informed solutions so as to enable My Career Chapter's application in the career education class-room or individual counselling.

### *Pedagogical Improvements*

The first recommendation for improvement of the administrative process was to apply My Career Chapter across successive classes or sessions and "step it out". This could involve doing a Step for homework and then discussing the outcomes at the next class or session, and reflecting upon the learning with class peers or with the counsellors. This progressive approach was seen as a means to scaffold upward through the experience, building upon each step and each learning experience.

Given the visual complexity of the matrix, it was suggested that completing the ratings using different coloured pencils would assist in making the process easier and more readily interpretable. The other alternative—to support students with different learning styles—was to use different media as alternatives to the purely written work of the procedure (e.g., collage).

The final suggestion entailed applying My Career Chapter in a pair, either a class peer or with a parent/carer. This would involve the student working through the tasks while the



partner asked the items in an interview format and wrote the responses, and concurrently asking exploratory questions. Apart from reducing the actual labour of completing the procedure, it would potentially expand a student's breadth of self-understanding, through shared reflection and feedback, and perhaps enhance his or her family involvement in career exploration and decision making. This is discussed further in the next theme.

### *Engendering Dialogue in Discourse*

The participants indicated that the process of completing My Career Chapter would facilitate young people voicing their thoughts about life and career. The expression "getting it out of their head" was used by participants to allude to a process through which students would be able to talk and write about themselves in a positive, exploratory environment. One participant suggested that the process induced a form of the "empty-chair technique" in which a client has dialogue with an imaginary version of himself or herself. As Guidance Counsellors and teachers, they believed this process to be important in their work toward encouraging adolescents to explore their lives.

The participants recognised the importance of working through My Career Chapter with another person, such as a career education teacher or counsellor. They emphasised the potential for co-constructive outcomes; take for example this comment:

It's like holding up a mirror for the client to look back at themselves.....It's like putting a puzzle together. That you might have lots of little pieces in your hands, but somebody helps you to put them together to make a big picture.

In talking about the suggestion to include others in the application of My Career Chapter, the Guidance Counsellors recognised that students had different social selves and would present different selves to others in life (e.g., the difference between working with a parent or a peer).

...we talk about the different personas kids take on in their different groups..... So I think by doing that, by having a different audience, they can actually find it easier to access different lives, different voices.

Whilst acknowledging that there would be differences across dyads, they saw this as potential means of assisting a student to explore himself or herself through a process of triangulating separate stories and reflecting upon the differences and commonalities of the two experiences.

## **Discussion**

This study of Guidance Counsellors' experience and views of My Career Chapter established the perspective of a group who works with adolescents, as classroom pupils and clients in counselling. The study investigated their opinions with regard to the potential application of My Career Chapter with adolescents in their teaching and counselling practices. Using a focus group, which followed training in My Career Chapter, the study elucidated four main themes, all indicative of its alignment with the recommendations for the development of qualitative career assessment and counselling procedures (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003).

The results were generally consistent with the studies pertaining to counsellors of adult clients (i.e., McIlveen, 2007; McIlveen, Ford, & Dun, 2005) which had prompted the question of whether My Career Chapter was appropriate for adolescents. The results of this study lend tentative support to the suggestion that My Career Chapter is suitable for some adolescent clients. However, to assert that it is generally appropriate for adolescents is unwarranted at this stage of its development as a career assessment and counselling

procedure. Psychological-mindedness and developmental-readiness were raised as caveats to the tentative suggestion. Future research into My Career Chapter's application in a young population of clients would need to take into account these possible moderating variables, which are equally relevant to an adult population.

The participants readily moved into a pedagogical mode of thought in bringing their suggestions for improving the capacity of My Career Chapter for class-room applications (e.g., breaking it into steps across classes). This is evidence of the participants' genuine engagement in the focus group and attests to the study's trustworthiness, particularly in reference to its authenticity (Morrow, 2005) and transformative validity (Cho & Trent, 2006). Consistent with Morrow's suggestion regarding multiple sources of data, the Group Monitor's observation and notes secured this dimension of validity.

The study's trustworthiness could have been improved by the inclusion of a systematic search for opinions that may have been a source of contrary evidence that would challenge My Career Chapter's compliance with the recommendations for qualitative assessment and counselling procedures. Unfortunately, logistical limitations on the focus group and conducting follow-up interviews with the participants were beyond the resources of this study. Follow-up interviews with participants after they had returned to their work environment would have provided a further dimension of the critical appraisal of My Career Chapter.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that there is potential for the development and application of My Career Chapter with an adolescent client population. This would likely require modification of its content so as to improve its suitability for younger persons, and field testing would be necessary to guide that process. Furthermore, given the presence of the visuo-spatial and graphical features of My System of Career Influences (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2005), it would be interesting to consider whether there is value in My Career Chapter being developed as a parallel form in its predominantly verbal and written approach to the elucidation of adolescents' understanding of their systems of career influences, especially given the two procedures' shared and explicit foundations in the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006a).

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