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## MY CAREER CHAPTER AND THE CAREER SYSTEMS INTERVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

Writing an autobiography is not an easy task and the process does not come naturally for all clients. In my career counselling practice I have found that some clients do not know how to start or what to write about. It seems ironic that the one person who knows the most about himself/herself finds it challenging to write a personal life story. Thus, this chapter provides an introduction to the qualitative career assessment and counselling procedure My Career Chapter (MCC; McIlveen, 2006). MCC is a semi-structured procedure that entails the client writing a brief autobiographical narrative—a chapter—of his/her life. This chapter also provides an overview of the semi-structured interview that accompanies MCC, the Career Systems Interview (CSI; McIlveen, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. Both CSI and MCC operationalise the systems theory framework for career development (STF; Patton & McMahon, 2014). Furthermore, or the purposes of MCC's conceptual principles and administration, the key elements of narrative career counselling are taken to be: subjectivity and meaning; facilitated self-reflection; elaboration of self-concepts; collaborative process; and, open-ended story (McIlveen & Patton, 2007). When using MCC, the counsellor should aim to operationalise all of these elements of narrative career counselling.

#### *Administration of the CSI*

There are three key dimensions of the CSI. First, the counsellor should collect sufficient information so as to develop an initial formulation of the presenting issue. Second, the client should experience the interview as a relaxed conversation. Third, talking about the *influences* identified in the STF should be used as a reflective exercise by the client so as to provide a preparatory scaffold for him/her to write his/her autobiography in MCC, or to use other career assessment procedures. The CSI begins with the usual rapport-building questions (e.g., “What brings you here today?”) and then proceeds through the main interview that touches on all of the influences identified in the STF. At an early stage of the interview, I refer the client to the STF diagram (Patton & McMahon, 2014) and explain that nowadays it is important to take a holistic view of one's career. This is a useful “warm-up”, rapport-building activity because it provides clients with an opportunity to understand my perspectives as a counsellor.

The CSI questions progress from the outside of the STF to the inside; that is, from the environmental-societal influences, through to the social influences, and to then to the interpersonal and intrapersonal influences. Beginning with ostensibly impersonal matters before progressing to more intimate matters builds rapport. For example, in my culture in rural Australia, it is important to know where a person hails from because it is a way of connecting with other rural people. This ethic of rural conversation arises from the vast distances

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(and hours travel) between people who live in rural Australia and a need to psychologically close the distance. This often extends to a brief discussion of who one knows in a particular town. Also, particularly for indigenous Australians, it is important to know where one hails from with respect to family ties. Therefore, in this situation, it is appropriate to begin the CSI with a discussion of environmental-societal influences with questions, such as: Are you a local? Where do you come from? Would you like to work in a rural area or in a city? Although the CSI has a list of recommended questions, these are not to be taken as hard-and-fast. The aforementioned questions may seem rather bizarre to a person who is not familiar with such localised cultural nuance; therefore, the counsellor should present questions that ostensibly seem most relevant to the client.

The CSI may be amended according to the ebb and flow of the interview. Remember: It's a conversation not an interrogation. Sensitive matters (e.g., finances, sexuality) may be raised and elaborated at a later stage when rapport has been sufficiently developed and depending on their pertinence to the focus and themes of the counselling. In my experience, it has not been unusual for clients to ask, "Why do you want to know that? What has that got to do with my career?" These questions are usually not raised in a resistant manner or out of chagrin that boundaries of decency had been crossed; instead, the questions are raised out of sheer curiosity and puzzlement as to why career counselling would need to cover matters pertaining to relationships, for example. Therein rests one of the pernicious stereotypes of the division of work and non-work lives, and career and personal counselling.

At this juncture in the interview, the STF comes to the fore as a framework for career development learning. Patton and McMahon (2014) refer to the notion of *decentring* career, that of engaging in a process of understanding career as more than an entity that lives within the boundary—the skin—of an individual (and, this reframing of career equally applies to scholar, practitioner, and client alike). I present a print copy of the STF diagram on which I draw lines to connect influences with one another and provide further explanation to the client that although career counselling does indeed focus on knowledge, skills, and interests (the traditional grist), contemporary career counselling also focuses on a person's interpersonal world and the bigger picture of society and the environment. The is an important rapport building exercise because it demystifies the career counselling process and allows the client to affirm the boundaries he/she wishes to maintain in the counselling—which is empowering for client and counsellor.

Upon completing the CSI, the counsellor must make a judgement regarding the next phase of career assessment. This may entail consideration of whether there is a need to extend the interview process to explore some of the influences in more detail in the next session. A crucial decision is to determine whether proceeding to MCC would be of any value to the client. Part of this judgement includes consideration of whether other career assessment procedures may be more useful at that particular point in time or whether the client has sufficient interest in a narrative approach to counselling.

#### *Administration of MCC*

MCC may be administered electronically or written by hand. In the case of electronic administration, the word processor version of MCC is emailed to the

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client. In either case, I first show the client a print copy of MCC, literally flicking through each page explaining how to use MCC. MCC progresses by steps and there are seven. Each step is a scaffold for the next. All steps do not need to be completed in one sitting.

*Step 1: Some warm-up questions.* The first activity requires the client to answer a series of questions with the instruction to not spend too much time on each and to write brief notes if required. Each question is a stimulus for thinking about a career influence (e.g., What are your friends doing and how do their choices affect you?). Step 1 serves as a reminder of the discussion that transpired in the CSI.

*Step 2: Pondering the big picture.* This activity prepares the client to decentre the influences of his/her career; that is, to consider influences beyond the intrapersonal. A picture of the STF is provided along with a very brief rationale for the activity, suggesting that the world-of-work and career is made up of multiple, multilayered influences. The client is instructed to consider each influence for a few moments and to write notes if required.

*Step 3: Compatibility of personal and environmental-social influences:* To further the decentring process, the client is asked to rate the level of compatibility and incompatibility among his/her personal influences (e.g., interests, skills, values, health, morals) with respect to his/her wider influences (e.g., workplace, peers, family, job market, media). The influences are laid out as grid with personal influences down the left (y-axis) and environmental-social influences across the top (x-axis). In each cell that intersects the client is to enter a score between -2 (very incompatible) through to +2 (very compatible), with 0 indicating neither compatible nor incompatible.

*Step 4: Writing the manuscript.* Having completed the preparatory, decentring work, the client now writes the manuscript of his/her autobiographical chapter. The writing entails a sentence-completion process (cf., Loevinger, 1985). Each influence in the STF is represented by five sentence stems and the client is to complete each. There is a stem for writing about the past, present, and future. Also, there is a sentence stem that represents the impact of the influence and one that represents its emotional valence, and the client must also rate the strength of impact and emotion. Here is an example using the influence of family:

There was a time when my family ...

My family says that ...

I expect that my family ...

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

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

The client is instructed to take his/her time and that there is no need to hurry, and to refer back to the previous activities in Steps 1 to 3 if necessary.

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*Step 5: Proof reading to yourself and back again.* Now that the client has written the bulk of the manuscript, he/she engages in a process that is described as “proof reading”. This stage is based on the model of meaning-making given in the theory of dialogical self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, Rijks, & Kempen, 1993). There are two important tenets of this model that are directly related to the administration of MCC. First, it is possible for a person to generate different voices, or *I-positions*, for each influence—thus, the importance of the decentring process. Second, it is possible for a person to generate dialogue between those different I-positions and thus reflexively create meaning. The client is instructed to imagine himself/herself as five years younger and then read aloud the manuscript to that younger person (i.e., an imagined I-position). Next, the client takes on the role of the younger person. Then, the younger person writes editorial feedback to the older person in response to hearing the story.

*Step 6: The conclusion.* To complete the feedback loop—the dialogue—the current (older) client writes a conclusion in response to the younger person’s feedback. This three-way process (i.e., older to younger, younger to older, older to younger) is an important operationalisation of the theory of dialogical self. Finally, the client writes about his/her strengths, obstacles, and the future.

*Step 7: Final reading to a confidante.* The client is now encouraged to read the manuscript to a person he/she trusts. Again, the reading to another person engages the three-way process of meaning-making.

#### *Interpretation of MCC in Counselling*

The interpretation of MCC in counselling involves three important processes: reading the manuscript aloud; highlighting themes; and converging on meaning. Begin the interpretation process with a discussion around the client’s reactions to using MCC and their initial impressions of themes that were discerned in his/her story. Read the manuscript aloud to the client and while reading highlight text that seems go toward a theme. Field research has shown that clients find the reading process quite positively confronting (McIlveen, Patton, & Hoare, 2008). In my experience, it is not unusual for clients to express emotionally that it is moving to hear their own words read aloud, as if being heard for the first time. Periodically stop and discuss points of interest with the client, particularly if he/she makes a comment or shows an emotional reaction to a particular topic.

Upon finishing the reading, talk with the client about the text that was highlighted as a potential theme. At this initial stage of interpretation, it is important come to an agreement on what are the main themes of the story. In this way, both client and counsellor converge. Not all themes need elaboration; however, the client and counsellor should discuss in detail those major themes that converge with the client’s presenting problem. This work may take several sessions (e.g., three interpretive interviews, McIlveen & du Preez, 2012). The client should keep his/her copy of MCC and bring it to each counselling session. The themes agreed between counsellor and client can be used to indicate other career assessment procedures, qualitative or psychometric. But, it is most important that the interpretation of other assessment procedures be

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reflected on using the themes derived from MCC, and there is a focus on future oriented actions toward resolving the client's concerns.

### *Application of MCC*

The CSI and MCC were designed for counselling with adults and mature adolescents (e.g., college and university students). Clinical research with clients has demonstrated that the clients respond positively to the two procedures (McIlveen, McGregor-Bayne, Alcock, & Hjertum, 2003; McIlveen et al., 2008). Furthermore, research into practitioners' experiences of MCC found it to be an ethically safe tool for use in career counselling (McIlveen, 2007) and that it had potential for use with younger adolescents (McIlveen, Patton, & Hoare, 2007). Current research and development aims to create a shorter version of MCC.

<sup>1</sup> Electronic copies of MCC and CSI are available free of charge from the author.

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