A Narrative Sentence-Completion Process for Systems Career Assessment

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September 2004

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Abstract

Constructivist and narrative approaches to career counselling have emerged as viable practical alternatives to traditional models. This paper describes the development of a career counselling assessment process that is based upon notions derived from constructivism, narrative, and systems theory. The technique utilises a sentence-completion method to facilitate clients' exploration of personal career systems. Evaluation of the technique indicates that clients experienced a positive reaction and no negative reaction to the process. Furthermore, there was tentative evidence that it may impact upon the positive expectations for their career counselling.

The theoretical assumptions and practices of vocational psychology and career counselling have been variously brought into question through postmodernist challenges to objectivist methodology and logical-positivism (e.g., Patton & McMahon, 1999; Pryor & Bright, 2003; Richardson, 1993; Savickas, 1994). Despite the evidence indicating the effectiveness of career development interventions in general (Oliver & Spokane, 1988; Sexton, Whiston, Bleuer, & Walz, 1997; Swanson, 1995; Whiston, Sexton, & Lasoff, 1998), the robust criticism of logical-positivism and objectivity, as it has been applied to the practice of career counselling, has opened the way for the accession of a new paradigm for career counselling that has been established upon 'constructivist' and 'social constructionist' notions (McMahon & Patton, 2000; Savickas, 1993; Young & Collin, 2004). This paper contributes to the professional discourse of these 'new' approaches by introducing a counselling technique based upon the notions of constructivist career counselling.

CONSTRUCTIVISMS AND CAREER COUNSELLING

In their introduction to the special edition of the Journal of Vocational Behavior devoted to constructivism and social constructionism, Young and Collin (2004) elegantly set out a useful synthesis of the literature under the plural rubric of 'constructivisms' (hereafter constructivism for convenience). Young and Collin also adroitly describe constructivism as focusing on "meaning making and the construction of the social and psychological worlds through individual, cognitive processes while [social constructionism] emphasizes that the social and psychological worlds are made real (constructed) through social processes and interaction" (p. 375). Hence, social constructionism actively aims to include distal factors within the frame of an

individual's experience of the world, and attends less to internal psychological processes; whereas, constructivism attends to the proximal, phenomenal, mental experiences of the world. Despite the differences, both forms of knowing have generated a stimulating array of implications for the practice of career counselling.

A career counselling process, enacted under the aegis of constructivism, requires the counsellor to enter into the psychosocial sphere of a person's career system. This incorporates the notion of a 'therapeutic system' in which counsellor and client exist within one another's systems, and thus coalesce to create a new system. The counsellor cannot understand the person by taking an independent vantage and objectively observe this system; they must enter, and, if only briefly, immerse into the living discourse of a person's career-life. Immersion into the narrative pays tribute to the subjectivity of the counselling experience and phenomenological 'locations' revealed by Richardson (1993). In the counselling process, the career counsellor is not an expert, but a facilitator of a career-life learning-experience and a 'co-constructor' of meaning inherently embedded in the process.

Walsh (1996) identified that in the nexus of theory of career development and counselling practice, the real work of applying a career theory through the practice of career counselling, falls to the skill of the counsellor. This subjectivity of this position highlights the difficulty of actually translating theory to practice. Constructivism must address this pragmatic problem if it is to acquire the widespread professional acceptance enjoyed by traditional models of career development practice. Constructivism can generate myriad forms in theory and practice. Inasmuch intellectually liberating, the breadth of constructivism also has the potential of being

paralysing for practitioners seeking ways to pragmatically operationalise such a complex paradigm in the counselling dyad.

Constructivism has directed career practitioners toward the holistic experience of a person's career within their environmental context. An exemplar of this inclusive and dynamic approach has been the Systems Theory Framework (STF) (Patton & McMahon, 1999). The STF emphasises social constructionist notions of embedding career within a blend of human experiences ranging from the intra-psychic (e.g., values) through to vast and apparently intangible environment context variables (e.g., political decisions). The STF dynamically tethers myriad elements of career by invoking the notions of recursiveness, time (past, present, and future), and change. Moreover, STF emphasises that the valence of particular factors can change, that the connectedness of variables can change, and that the relationships between variables may not necessarily be reciprocal. In this way, the constellations of factors within a person's career-life system throb and writhe as if they were part of a living system. This description metaphorically portrays the chaotic dynamism that is 'career', as propounded by Prior and Bright (2003).

NARRATIVE APPROACH

Personal meaning making and narrative identity have emerged as valued topics of the psychology of personality and life transitions (e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2004; McAdams, 1993; Singer, 2004). Narratives play a crucial role in a person's understanding of their self and world.

> Narrative and self are inseparable in that narrative is simultaneously born out
> of experience and gives shape to experience. Narrative activity provides
> tellers with an opportunity to impose order on otherwise disconnected events,

and to create continuity between past, present, and the imagined worlds (Ochs and Capps, 1996, p. 19).

Ochs and Caps suggest that narratives integrate various modalities of human expression (e.g., speech, music, movement) in order to manifest personal or communal meaning. They suggest that narratives contain elements of temporality (i.e., time-reference to past, present, future), and point of view, a notion similar to Richardson's (1993) location, but includes the binding power of plot.

In his seminal text on narrative career counselling, Cochran (1997, p.5-7) describes three features of narrative as life story:

First, a narrative provides a temporal organisation, integrating beginning, middle, and end into a whole…… Second, a story is a synthetic structure that configures an indefinite expansion of elements and spheres of elements into a whole….. Third, the plot of a narrative carries a point.

Narrative is usually the content that a client brings to counselling as an initially inchoate concern and then through to a broader, evolving personal story which seeks to explain and predict a life. It is through the telling and the hearing of a life story, through the predominant psychosocial currency of counselling - talk, text and image - that both angst and insight emerge; therein lays the collaborative work of career *counselling*.

Narrative protagonists such as Chen (1997, 1998, 2002), Cochran (1997), Gibson (2004), and Peavy (2000, 2001), assert that a narrative approach to career counselling is a meaning-making process that must relate to the entire complexity of an individual's life and identity. A narrative approach is not simply a matter of recounting events, but an intentional and interpretive interpersonal communication, which endeavours to generate coherent and connected meanings. Narrative career

counselling requires the counsellor to take part in the narration (i.e., co-construct) through his or her own contributions of insights to explore the client's position. This places onus upon the counsellor to know his or her own location and power within the dyad. The career counsellor assists the client to draw relationships between unexplored or unclear relationships between elements of an individual's narrative. A crucial feature of the perspective is that the client is an active agent in the process, as opposed to a passive recipient of expert knowledge. Moreover, future-orientation is a source of primary concern in the formation of narrative in counselling.

Narrative technique

Don Super's (1957) thematic extrapolation method laid an important foundation for the concept of deriving understanding of a person's career from his or her own personal history. This technique proceeds through analysis of events and development in order to synthesise recurrent themes and underlying trends and ultimately predict their career future. This stood in contrast to the psychometric, actuarial methods available at that time. Although originally conceived from the position of a logical-positive approach to career, like many other 'traditional' techniques, this one is readily subsumed under the banner of constructivism by its emphasis on the personal experience of the individual. Although ignored because of an inadequate scientific support base at that time, Super adumbrated the future emergence of thematic exploration.

As practitioners, we assert that the interview is the mainstay of career counselling and certainly the primary vehicle of personal exploration under the rubric of constructivism with its attendant shared dialogue, interpretation, and ultimately, meaning making for the client's development. Cochran (1997) and Brott (2004) described a range of techniques or topics for enriching the interview process or

empowering narration (e.g., life line, life chapters, success experiences, family constellations, role models, early recollections, life-role circles). These techniques have been primarily written or spoken in modality. Recent work has highlighted visuo-spatial avenues of narrative career counselling; and these include: career system diagrams (Miller, 2004); text-boxes connected to pictures, personal coat-of-arms, (Gibson, 2000, 2003); collage of meaningful pictures (Adams, 2003); mind-maps (Pollitt, 2003); career-o-gram (Thorngren and Feit, 2001); and life-role circles (Brown and Brooks, 1991).

There is convincing evidence that the act of writing about oneself and issues has positive benefits upon wellbeing (e.g., Cameron and Nicholls, 1998). Life-lines (Goldman, 1992), life chapters (Cochran, 1997) and the storied approach to career counselling (Brott, 2001), essentially epitomise the notion of an individual talking and writing about his or her self and their career life in order to generate some meaning related to career. Brott centres the process on story co-construction, deconstruction and construction. Through these processes the client explores the meanings and interconnectedness of life roles (e.g., family, leisure).

McIlveen, McGregor-Bayne, Alcock, and Hjertum (2003) adapted the storied approach (Brott, 2001) by developing a semi-structured interview based around the Systems Theory Framework (STF) (Patton & McMahon, 1999). Their method structured the interview conversation around the myriad variables of careerlife identified in the STF. Furthermore, McIlveen et al. (2003) found that the method was efficacious in stimulating career attributions and intentions toward self-exploration, when compared against a 'standard' psychological assessment interview.

We aimed to further that work by developing a written means of exploring an individual's career system through his or her own narrative elaboration. Our intention

was to facilitate, through the use of writing, a client's thinking about his or her career issues through a matrix of variables identified in the STF. Our reasoning was that providing a guide to a writing process would encourage the client to comprehensively consider their career as an entire system, and distinct from writing about a narrower topic (e.g., recollections of success). We assert that this guided elaboration firmly embedded the technique within the domain of constructivism. In addition we sought to evaluate the technique by assessing client's reactions to completing it.

CONSTRUCTING A NARRATIVE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The recommendations for developing qualitative career assessment processes published by McMahon, Patton, and Watson (2003) were used as a guide for the development of a technique. These recommendations included:

- Ground the assessment process in theory;

- Test the career assessment process;

- Ensure that the process can be completed in a reasonable time frame;

- Design a process that fosters holism;

- Write instructions for the client;

- Write readable and easily understood instructions;

- Sequence logical, simple, small, achievable steps;

- Provide a focused and flexible process;

- Encourage cooperative involvement of counsellor and client; and

- Include a debriefing process.

Item construction

The sentence-completion paradigm was chosen as a useful means of facilitating client's writing. Sentence-completion has been used to develop a measure of ego-identity in other discipline areas, most notably in the work of Loevinger (1985). In the work presented here, we borrowed the concept of completing sentences as a form of projective technique. We believed that an individual would psychologically project onto a part-sentence those career issues most meaningful for them.

Each variable of the STF and others not included in the framework, but ones we believed to be important for personal understanding (e.g., emotional impact), were represented by a part sentence. There were 31 system variables and three generic variables - 'Impact', 'Summary' and 'The Future'. Each variable had three partial sentences, summing to a total of 102 items. For each variable, one sentence-part was present or past focused, one sentence was future focused, and the final sentence addressed the valence of the variable through a rating (low, medium, high) of how the variable impacted upon careerlife. In the case of the variable 'Health', for example, the sentences were:

At the moment my health is …..

My health will …..

How healthy I am has a low/medium/high impact upon my careerlife because

…..

The part-sentences were derived from the first author's recollections of common issues discussed in counselling sessions using the semi-structured interview developed by McIlveen et al. (2003). Potential for 'bias' was attenuated by making the parts are generic as possible. It should nevertheless be noted that a postmodernist approach assumes that 'objectivity' is unattainable and it consequently does not

necessarily eschew 'bias'. A postmodernist perspective requires an awareness, acceptance, and if necessary, 'deconstruction' of one's influence in any discursive process, and constructivist career counselling is no exception.

The form

The nine-page form was entitled 'My Career Future' and included a comprehensive set of instructions on the first page. The instructions were written to encourage the writer to be open and avoid prejudging his or her responses. The concept of the interconnectedness of variables of the career system was emphasised along with importance of open exploration. This was reinforced by a modified graphical representation of an STF diagram (Patton & McMahon, 1999, p. 163). The modified version did not include the original diagrammatical elements for recursiveness, change over time, chance, and included additional variables (e.g., dreams, self-confidence). Each item had sufficient space for the writer to fit a long sentence or to accommodate large handwriting. The form was printed in landscape format.

Initial trial

The items were initially tested for 'feel' with respect how it felt to actually write responses to them. The lists of items were completed by the three authors and by three individuals who volunteered to test-run the items. Feedback from this process resulted in modifications to the items (e.g., shortening some sentence-parts because they were too prescriptive) and the process (e.g., including a diagram of a career system).

EVALUATION METHOD

Upon completing the final version of 'My Career Chapter', we proceeded to its evaluation in a counselling setting. The evaluation was exploratory and with a focus upon clients' emotive reactions, rather than a definitive account of the techniques' potential efficacy.

Participants

Twenty-two clients of the University's Careers Service voluntarily participated in the evaluation process. The counselling services of the university are free of charge. The mean age was 22.86 years, 14 were female and eight were male. All but three were undergraduate students. All of the participants' first language was English.

Measures

The *Client Reactions System* (CRS) (Hill, Helms, Spiegel, & Tichenor, 1988) was used in this study. This scale was developed to measure clients' reactions to therapist interventions. The scale contains fourteen positive reactions (e.g., I felt understood, or hopeful) and seven negative reactions (e.g., worse, confused). Clients were instructed to rate their level of agreement using a seven-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Unfortunately Hill et al. did not present reliability indices.

The *Clients' Constructions of Change Scale* (CCCS) (Dumka, Sprenkle, & Martin, 1995) was modified for use in this study. The CCCS was developed to measure clients' perception of their counselling experience. The scale measures four constructs - *outcome optimism*, *perceived progress*, *self-agency*, and *effort and persistence*. The scale consists of sixteen items with four items per construct

subscale. Clients were instructed to rate their level of agreement using a seven-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Dumka et al. reported Chronbach's alpha indices as .81 for *outcome optimism*, .88 for *perceived progress*, .81 for *self-agency*, and .84 for *effort and persistence*. The CCCS items were modified slightly to suit the context of career counselling, as opposed to the original scale's context of clinical counselling. For example, the term 'career counselling' was inserted in place of 'counselling' where appropriate. There were no obvious contextual or meaning related anomalies in making these changes.

Procedure and design

A one-shot case study design was implemented. The Careers Service operates a 'drop-in' session in which clients' concerns are screened in terms of the presenting issues and needs. This triage process results in some clients being given information only, whereas others may be referred to alternative agencies, and some could be referred into the career counselling service. Due to the constraints of offering, and, moreover not withholding, counselling services to potential clients, the participants were not randomly selected. Those clients appropriate for career counselling were invited to take part in the trial; and hence they represented a convenience sample rather than a true random sample. Allocation to a counsellor (three in total) was based upon their availability.

At the end of the drop-in screening interview, the participants were invited to complete the My Career Chapter exercise and return with it at their scheduled full career counselling appointment. They were presented a brief, standardised rationale that their career concerns related to a system of influences – at this point a systems diagram was shown – and that it may be helpful to write about their system of

influences. They were instructed to read the guidelines and complete the Chapter.

They were instructed to complete the evaluation schedules, CRS and CCCS,

immediately following their completion of the written exercise. Immediately

completing the evaluation schedules was required to mitigate the potential effects of

intervening influences. Instructions specifically guided the individuals to rate their

experience in relation to completing the written work (and to exclude their experience

of the drop-in screening interview). The schedules were to be given to the receptionist

upon return for their counselling appointment.

RESULTS

There were no missing data. Skewness and kurtosis coefficients of the variables were

converted to a z-statistic (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). This analysis indicated that

there was no significant skewness or kurtosis. Outlier screening indicated that there

were two cases whose scores on the CCCS subscales were markedly lower than those

of other cases. Though their scores depressed the average scores somewhat, these

cases' data were nevertheless retained in the dataset for the overall statistical analysis.

Clients' scores on the CRS for positive reactions and negative reactions are

presented in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. All mean scores of the positive variables

were more than four (ie, neither agree nor disagree).   The mean scores for the

variables *understood*, *supported*, *hopeful*, *relief*, *clear*, and *educated* were rated

between 'slightly agree' to 'agree'.   These results indicated a mild positive reaction

to completing the My Career Chapter.

Insert Table 1 here

Means for the negative reactions were all between ratings of two and four with a trend toward a rating of 'slightly disagree' to 'disagree'. These results indicated that there was no evidence of an overall negative reaction to completing the My Career Chapter exercise.

Insert Table 2 here

The mean scores for the CCCS subscales are presented in Table 3. The alpha coefficients were .63 for *outcome optimism*, .66 for *self-agency*, .69 for *perceived progress*, and .76 for *effort and persistence*. These coefficients were less than those reported by Dumka et al. (1995); however they were taken to indicate that the scales had acceptable reliability for the purposes of an exploratory study in accordance with Streiner's (2003) suggestions. The subscales *outcome optimism*, *self-agency*, and *effort and persistence*, all showed a rating between 'slightly agree' to 'agree'. The subscale *perceived progress* was rated between 'neither agree nor disagree' to 'slightly agree'. Taken together, these results indicated a mild positive account across three subscales, and an equivocal or neutral positive outcome for progress.

Insert Table 3 here

DISCUSSION

Constructivist approaches to career development offer a fresh paradigm for the practice of career counselling. Under this aegis we sought to further develop narrative

and systems models by constructing a career counselling technique that facilitated a client's self-exploration of their career system. Moreover, we sought to establish the reactions clients felt immediately after, and in response to, completing the assessment process.

The CRS (Hill et al., 1988) furnishes a measure of clients' positive and negative emotional reactions. The positive emotional variables *understood*, *supported*, *hopeful*, *relief*, *clear*, and *educated* were most frequently endorsed. All of the remaining positive variables fell within the mid-range and certainly none were within the range of being absent (which would have been indicated by ratings of disagreement). We interpret this result as meaning that clients experienced a mild positive emotional state in reaction to the completion of the tool. Although a positive state is encouraging, we were more interested with the results of the negative emotions, which indicated that the process did no harm. The ratings on negative emotional variables were in the range of disagreement, that is, clients were not experiencing a negative emotion in reaction to the completion process. In summary, the outcomes on the CRS indicate that the completion process is not emotionally offensive to clients.

The CCCS (Dumka et al., 1995) was modified for the purposes of this study by changing the content of items to reflect career counselling, as distinct from the original schedule, which related to clinical counselling. The alpha coefficients reported here indicate that the modified CCCS had acceptable reliability. It is not unlikely that the relatively small sample size had an impact upon the coefficients. Nevertheless, we have taken to cautiously view the results as interpretable. We were not surprised to find that *perceived progress* was the lowest of the three subscales. Given that clients had only just commenced the career counselling experience it

would be unlikely that they would indicate a sudden change in their movement toward an improved career status. The results on the subscales *outcome optimism*, *self-agency*, and *effort and persistence* were encouraging, in that we interpreted the three together as indicating that the experience may have positively generated a sense of hope and enthusiasm for the career exploration process upon which they had embarked.

Although the natural contingencies of the setting in which this evaluation was completed did not allow for the operation of a clear experimental design, we assert that our explicit instructions to clients - that they should *immediately* rate their reactions *specifically* toward the tool and completion process - secured the validity of the results. Notwithstanding the caveat on the design, the results indicate that the process of completing My Career Chapter was not offensive or negative and therefore did not place clients at risk of psychological harm. Moreover, the results offer initial evidence that the experience of writing My Career Chapter was on average a positive one that enhanced their positive expectations of career exploration. We conclude therefore that My Career Chapter stands as another narrative career counselling tool that could be adapted by practitioners to suit their needs.

My Career Chapter would benefit from further development and refinement. Future evaluations of this technique should investigate its relationship to the subsequent counselling experience into which the client returns with completed form in-hand and to assess its efficacy in comparisons with other narrative techniques.

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THEORY AND PRACTICE

What is one purported difference between constructivism and social constructionism?

Answer – constructivism has its focus upon the (internal) phenomenological construal processes utilised by an individual to make sense of their world, whereas social constructionism has its focus upon how the individual makes sense of their world through the multiple (external) discourses in which they live.

What are some guidelines for developing a qualitative assessment process?

Answer - Ground the assessment process in theory; test the career assessment process; ensure that the process can be completed in a reasonable time frame; design a process that fosters holism; write instructions for the client; write readable and easily understood instructions; sequence logical, simple, small, achievable steps; provide a focused and flexible process; encourage cooperative involvement of counsellor and client; and include a debriefing process.

Table 1

Mean Scores for Positive Reactions on the Client Reactions System

Variable	M	SD	95% Confidence Limits	
			Lower	Upper
Understood	5.95	.57	5.70	6.21
Supported	5.73	1.16	5.21	6.24
Hopeful	5.95	.58	5.70	6.21
Relief	5.55	1.06	5.08	6.01
Aware of negative thoughts/behaviours	4.55	1.44	3.91	5.18
Clear	5.41	.85	5.03	5.79
Better self-understanding	4.77	1.10	4.30	5.25
Awareness of feelings	4.91	1.15	4.40	5.42
Responsibility	4.77	1.02	4.32	5.23
Unstuck	4.95	1.17	4.43	5.48
New perspective	4.70	.72	4.36	5.00
Educated	5.00	1.11	4.51	5.49
New ways to behave	4.70	1.10	4.20	5.16
Challenged	4.86	1.55	4.18	5.55

Table 2
Mean Scores for Negative Reactions on the Client Reactions System

Variable	*M*	*SD*	95% Confidence Limits Lower	Upper
Scared	3.32	1.60	2.62	4.02
Worse	2.60	1.44	1.95	3.23
Stuck	3.18	1.40	2.56	3.80
Lack of direction	2.50	1.37	1.89	3.11
Confused	3.68	1.32	3.10	4.27
Misunderstood	3.05	1.68	2.30	3.79
No reaction	2.91	1.19	2.38	3.44

Table 3

Mean Scores for the Client Construction of Change Scale

| Subscale | *M* | *SD* | 95% Confidence Limits | |
			Lower	Upper
Outcome optimism	5.64	.75	5.30	5.97
Self-agency	5.40	.99	4.96	5.84
Perceived progress	4.60	.91	4.19	5.00
Effort and persistence	5.85	.85	5.47	6.23